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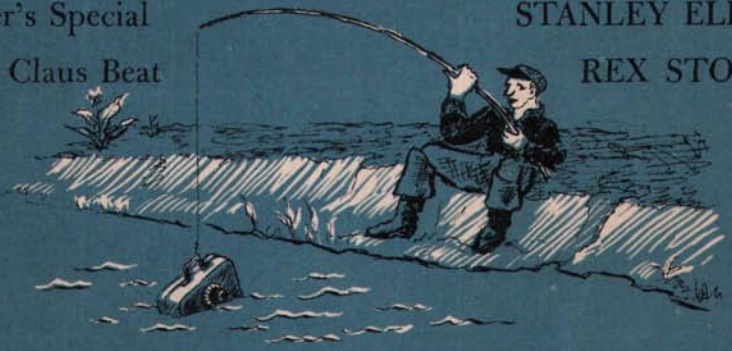

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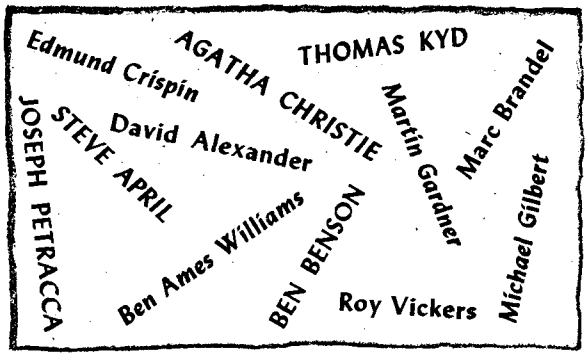

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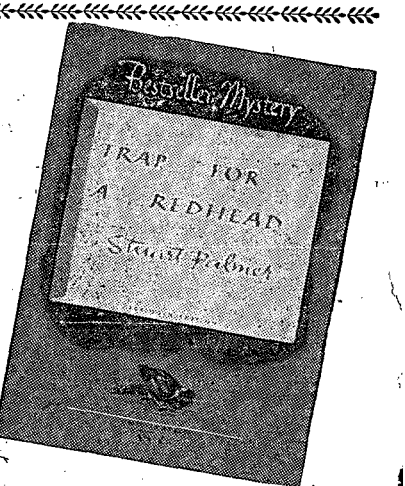
EXCITING MYSTERY READING

TRAP FOR A REDHEAD

(formerly "Nipped in the Bud")

by Stuart Palmer

Leggy, redheaded Ina Kell came to New York seeking adventure. She found it, too — as key witness to a brutal murder. And then the lovely Ina disappeared. ". . . exhilarating . . . entertaining . . ." says the New York *Times*. **A BESTSELLER MYSTERY**



HEADED FOR A HEARSE

by Jonathan Latimer

William Crane had one week to prove Robert Westland innocent of murder. So Crane got drunk. You couldn't have confidence in a crazy guy like that — not unless you were the killer. Then you'd do everything to kill Crane. "Better than The Thin Man," comments *Christopher Morley*.

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LAST MINUTE ANNOUNCEMENT!

On May 11, 1956 Simon & Schuster will publish Stanley Ellin's first book of short stories. It will be titled, simply, MYSTERY STORIES, *and contain a Foreword by Ellery Queen. The volume will offer ten memorable Ellinesques, arranged in chronological order of their writing, beginning with Mr. Ellin's classic first story, "The Specialty of the House," and ending with his First Prize winner in EQMM's Tenth Annual Contest, "The Moment of Decision." In your Editors' opinion every single one of the ten tales is a gem, and the group as a whole are among the finest short stories of crime, detection, and mystery written in the past decade . . .* MYSTERY STORIES *by Stanley Ellin is a book to read, to own, to treasure, and — that rare quality to be found these days — to reread. Don't miss it!*

BROKER'S SPECIAL

by STANLEY ELLIN

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME IN A GOOD many years that Cornelius, a Wall Street broker, had made the homeward trip in any train other than the Broker's Special. The Special was his kind of train; the passengers on it were his kind of people. Executives, professionals, men of substance and dignity who could recognize each other without introductions, and understand each other without words.

If it weren't for the Senator's dinner party, Cornelius reflected. But the Senator had insisted, so there was no escape from that abomination of abominations, the midweek dinner party. And, of course, no escape from the necessity of taking an earlier train home to the tedium of dressing, and an evening of too much food, too much liquor, and all the resultant misery on the following morning.

Filled with this depressing thought Cornelius stepped down heavily from the train to the familiar platform and walked over to his car. Since Claire preferred the station wagon, he used the sedan to get to and from the station. When they were first married two years ago she had wanted to chauffeur him back and forth, but the idea had somehow repelled him. He had always felt there was something vaguely obscene about the way other men publicly kissed their wives goodbye in front of the station every morning, and the thought of being placed in their position filled him with a chilling embarrassment. He had not told this to Claire, however. He had simply told her he had not married her to obtain a housekeeper

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or chauffeur. She was to enjoy her life, not fill it with unnecessary duties.

Ordinarily, it was no more than a fifteen-minute drive through the countryside to the house. But now, in keeping with the already exasperating tenor of the day's events, he met an unexpected delay. A mile or so past where the road branched off from the highway it crossed the main line of the railroad. There was no guard or crossing gate here, but a red light, and a bell which was ringing an insistent warning as Cornelius drove up. He braked the car, and sat tapping his fingers restlessly on the steering wheel while the endless, clanking length of a freight went by. And then, before he could start the car again, he saw them.

It was Claire and a man. His wife and some man in the station wagon roaring past him into town. And the man was driving — seated big and blond and arrogant behind the wheel like a Viking — with one arm around Claire who, with eyes closed, rested her head on his shoulder. There was a look on her face, too, such as Cornelius had never seen there before, but which he had sometimes dreamed of seeing. They passed by in a flash, but the picture they made was burned as brilliant in his mind as a photograph on film.

He would not believe it, he told himself incredulously; he refused to believe it! But the picture was there before him, growing clearer each second, becoming more and more terribly alive as he watched it. The man's arm possessing her. Her look of acceptance. Of sensual acceptance.

He was shaking uncontrollably now, the blood pounding in his head, as he prepared to turn the car and follow them. Then he felt himself go limp. Follow them where? Back to town undoubtedly, where the man would be waiting for the next train to the city. And then what? A denunciation in the grand style? A scene? A public humiliation for himself as much as for them?

He could stand anything, but not such humiliation. It had been bad enough when he had first married Claire and realized his friends were laughing at him for it. A man in his position to marry his secretary, and a girl half his age at that! Now he knew what they had been laughing at, but he had been blind then. There had been such an air of cool formality about her when she carried on her duties in the office; she sat with such prim dignity when she took his notes; she had dressed so modestly — and when he had first invited her to dinner she had reddened with the flustered naïveté of a young girl being invited on her first date. Naïveté! And all the time, he thought furiously, she must have been laughing at me. She, along with the rest of them.

He drove to the house slowly, almost blindly. The house was empty, and he realized that, of course, it was Thursday, the servant's day off, which made it the perfect day for Claire's purpose. He went directly to the

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library, sat down at the desk there, and unlocked the top drawer. His gun was in that drawer, a short-barreled .38, and he picked it up slowly, hefting its cold weight in his hand, savoring the sense of power it gave him. Then abruptly his mind went back to something Judge Hilliker had once told him, something strangely interesting that the old man had said while sharing a seat with him on the Broker's Special.

"Guns?" Hilliker had said. "Knives? Blunt instruments? You can throw them all out of the window. As far as I'm concerned there is just one perfect weapon — an automobile. Any automobile in good working order. Why? Because when an automobile is going fast enough it will kill anyone it hits. And if the driver gets out and looks sorry he'll find that he's the one getting everybody's sympathy, and not that bothersome corpse on the ground who shouldn't have been in the way anyhow. As long as the driver isn't drunk or flagrantly reckless he can kill anybody in this country he wants to, and suffer no more than a momentary embarrassment and a penalty that isn't even worth worrying about.

"Think it over, man," the Judge continued: "to most people the automobile is some sort of god, and if God happens to strike you down it's your hard luck. As for me, when I cross a street I just say a little prayer."

There was more of that in Judge Hilliker's mordant and long-winded style, but Cornelius had no need to remember it. What he needed he now had, and very carefully he put the gun back in the drawer, slid the drawer shut, and locked it.

Claire came in while he still sat brooding at the desk, and he forced himself to regard her with cold objectivity — this radiantly lovely woman who was playing him for a fool, and who now stood wide-eyed in the doorway with an incongruously large bag of groceries clutched to her.

"I saw the car in the garage," she said breathlessly. "I was afraid something was wrong. That you weren't feeling well . . ."

"I feel very well."

"But you're home so early. You've never come this early before."

"I've always managed to refuse invitations to midweek dinner parties before."

"Oh, Lord!" she gasped. "The dinner! It never even entered my mind. I've been so busy all day . . ."

"Yes?" he said. "Doing what?"

"Well, everyone's off today, so I took care of the house from top to bottom, and then when I looked in the pantry and saw we needed some things I ran into town for them." She gestured at the bulky paper bag with her chin. "I'll have your bath ready, and your things laid out as soon as I put this stuff away."

Watching her leave he felt an honest admiration for her. Another woman would have invented a visit to a friend who might, at some later time, accidentally let the cat out of the bag. Or another woman would

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not have thought to burden herself with a useless package to justify a trip into town. But not Claire, who was evidently as clever as she was beautiful.

And she *was* damnably attractive. His men friends may have laughed behind his back, but in their homes she was always eagerly surrounded by them. When he entered a roomful of strangers with her he saw how all men's eyes followed her with a frankly covetous interest. No, nothing must happen to her; nothing at all. It was the man who had to be destroyed, just as one would destroy any poacher on his preserves, any lunatic who with axe in hand ran amok through his home. Claire would have to be hurt a little, would have to be taught her lesson, but that would be done most effectively through what happened to the man.

Cornelius learned very quickly that his plans would have to take in a good deal more than the simple act of waylaying the man and running him down. There were details, innumerable details covering every step of the way before and after the event, which had to be jigsawed into place bit by bit in order to make it perfect.

In that respect, Cornelius thought gratefully, the Judge had been far more helpful than he had realized in his irony. Murder by automobile was the perfect murder, because, with certain details taken care of, it was not even murder at all! There was the victim, and there was the murderer standing over him, and the whole thing would be treated with perfunctory indifference. After all, what was one more victim among the thirty thousand each year? He was a statistic, to be regarded with some tongue-clicking and a shrug of helplessness.

Not by Claire, of course. Coincidence can be stretched far, but hardly far enough to cover the case of a husband's running down his wife's lover. And that was the best part of it. Claire would know, but would be helpless to say anything, since saying anything must expose her own wrongdoing. She would spend her life, day after day, knowing that she had been found out, knowing that a just vengeance had been exacted, and standing forewarned against any other such temptations that might come her way.

But what of the remote possibility that she might choose to speak out and expose herself? There, Cornelius reflected, fitting another little piece of the jigsaw into place, coincidence would instantly go to work for him. If there was no single shred of evidence that he had ever suspected her affair, or that he had ever seen the man before, the accident *must* be regarded by the law as coincidence. Either way his position was unassailable.

It was with this in mind that he patiently and single-mindedly went to work on his plans. He was tempted at the start to call in some professional investigator who could promptly and efficiently bring him the information

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he wanted, but after careful consideration he put this idea aside. A smart investigator might easily put two and two together after the accident. If he were honest he might go to the authorities with his suspicions; if he were dishonest he might be tempted to try blackmail. Obviously, there was no way of calling in an outsider without risking one danger or the other. And nothing, nothing at all, was going to be risked here.

So it took Cornelius several precious weeks to glean the information he wanted, and, as he admitted to himself, it might have taken even longer had not Claire and the man maintained such an unfailing routine. Thursday was the one day of the week on which the man would pay his visits. Then, a little before the city-bound train arrived at the station, Claire would drive the station wagon into an almost deserted sidestreet a block from the Plaza. In the car the couple would kiss with an intensity that made Cornelius's flesh crawl.

As soon as the man left the car Claire would drive swiftly away, and the man would walk briskly to the Plaza, make his way through the cars parked at the curb there, cross the Plaza obviously sunk in his own thoughts and with only half an eye for passing traffic, and would enter the station. The third time Cornelius witnessed this performance he could have predicted the man's every step with deadly accuracy.

Occasionally, during this period, Claire mentioned that she was going to the city to do some shopping, and Cornelius took advantage of this as well. He was standing in a shadow of the terminal's waiting room when her train pulled in, he followed her at a safe distance to the street, his cab trailed hers almost to the door of the shabby apartment house where the man lived. The man was sitting on the grimy steps of the house, obviously waiting for her. When he led her into the house, as Cornelius bitterly observed, they held hands like a pair of school children, and then there was a long wait, a wait which took up most of the afternoon; but Cornelius gave up waiting before Claire reappeared.

The eruption of fury he knew after that scene gave him the idea of staging the accident there on the city streets the next day, but Cornelius quickly dismissed the thought. It would mean driving the car into the city, which was something he never did, and that would be a dangerous deviation from his own routine. Besides, city tabloids, unlike his staid local newspaper, sometimes publicized automobile accidents not only by printing the news of them, but also by displaying pictures of victim and culprit on their pages. He wanted none of that. This was a private affair. Strictly private.

No, there was no question that the only place to settle matters was right in the Plaza itself, and the more Cornelius reviewed his plans in preparation for the act the more he mar-

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veled at how flawless they were.

Nothing could conceivably go wrong. If by some mischance he struck down the man without killing him, his victim would be in the same position as Claire: unable to speak openly without exposing himself. If he missed the man entirely he was hardly in the dangerous position of an assassin who misses his victim and is caught with the gun or knife in his hand. An automobile wasn't a weapon; the affair would simply be another close call for a careless pedestrian.

However, he wanted no close calls, and to that end he took to parking the car somewhat farther from the station than he ordinarily did. The extra distance, he estimated, would allow him to swing the car across the Plaza in an arc which would meet the man as he emerged from between the parked cars across the street. That would just about make explanations uncalled-for. A man stepping out from between parked cars would be more in violation of the law than the driver who struck him!

Not only did he make sure to set the car at a proper distance from the station entrance, but Cornelius also took to backing it into place as some other drivers did. Now the front wheels were facing the Plaza, and he could quickly get up all the speed he wanted. More than that, he would be facing the man from the instant he came into sight.

The day before the one he had chosen for the final act, Cornelius waited until he was clear of traffic on his homeward drive, and then stopped the car on a deserted part of the road, letting the motor idle. Then he carefully gauged the distance to a tree some 30 yards ahead; this, he estimated, would be the distance across the Plaza. He started the car, and then drove it as fast as he could past the tree, the big machine snarling as it picked up speed. Once past the tree he braced himself, stepped hard on the brake, and felt the pressure of the steering wheel against his chest as the car slewed to a shrieking stop.

That was it. That was all there was to it . . .

He left the office the next day at the exact minute he had set for himself. After his secretary had helped him on with his coat he turned to her as he had prepared himself to do, and made a wry face.

"Just not feeling right," he said. "Don't know what's wrong with me, Miss Wynant."

And, as he knew good secretaries were trained to do, she frowned worriedly at him, and said, "If you didn't work so hard, Mr. Bolinger . . ."

He waved that aside brusquely. "Nothing that getting home early to a good rest won't cure. Oh," he slapped at the pockets of his coat, "my pills, Miss Wynant. They're in the top drawer over there."

They were only a few aspirins in an envelope, but it was the impression that counted. A man who was not feeling well had that much more

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justification for a mishap while he was driving.

The early train was familiar to him now; he had ridden on it several times during the past few weeks, but always circumspectly hidden behind a newspaper. Now it was to be different. When the conductor came through to check his commutation ticket, Cornelius was sitting limp in his seat, clearly a man in distress.

"Conductor," he asked, "if you don't mind, could you get me some water?"

The conductor glanced at him and hastily departed. When he returned with a dripping cup of water Cornelius slowly and carefully removed an aspirin from the envelope and washed it down gratefully.

"If there's anything else," the conductor said, "just you let me know."

"No," Cornelius said, "no, I'm a little under the weather, that's all."

But at the station the conductor was there to lend him a solicitous hand down, and dally briefly. "You're not a regular, are you?" the conductor said. "At least, not on this train."

Cornelius felt a lift of gratification. "No," he said, "I've only taken this train once before. I usually travel on the Broker's Special."

"Oh." The conductor looked him up and down, and grinned. "Well, that figures," he said. "Hope you found our service as good as the Special's."

In the small station Cornelius sat down on a bench, his head resting against the back of the bench, his eyes on the clock over the ticket agent's window. Once or twice he saw the agent glance worriedly through the window at him, and that was fine. What was not so fine was the rising feeling in him, a lurching nervousness in his stomach, a too-heavy thudding of his heart in his chest. He had allowed himself ten minutes here; each minute found the feeling getting more and more oppressive. It was an effort to contain himself, to prevent himself from getting to his feet and rushing out to the car before the minute hand of the clock had touched the small black spot that was his signal.

Then, on the second, he got up, surprised at the effort it required to do this, and slowly walked out of the station, the agent's eyes following him all the way, and down past the station to the car. He climbed behind the wheel, closed the door firmly after him, and started the motor. The soft purring of the motor under his feet sent a new strength up through him. He sat there soaking it up, his eyes fixed on the distance across the Plaza.

When the man first appeared, moving with rapid strides toward him, it struck Cornelius in some strange way that the tall, blond figure was like a puppet being drawn by an invisible wire to his destined place on the stage. Then, as he came closer, it was plain to see that he was smiling broadly, singing aloud in his exuberance of youth and strength — and triumph. That was the key which

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unlocked all paralysis, which sent the motor roaring into furious life.

For all the times he had lived the scene in his mind's eye, Cornelius was unprepared for the speed with which it happened. There was the man stepping out from between the cars, still blind to everything. There was Cornelius's hand on the horn, the ultimate inspiration, a warning that could not possibly be heeded, and more than anything else an insurance of success. The man swung toward the noise, his face all horror, his hands outthrust as if to fend off what was happening. There was the high-pitched scream abruptly cut off by the shock of impact, more violent than Cornelius had ever dreamed, and then everything dissolving into the screech of brakes.

The Plaza had been deserted before it had happened; now, people were running from all directions, and Cornelius had to push his way through them to catch a glimpse of the body.

"Better not look," someone warned, but he did look, and saw the crumpled form, the legs scissored into an unnatural position, the face graying as he watched. He swayed, and a dozen helping hands reached out to support him, but it was not weakness which affected him now, but an overwhelming, giddy sense of victory, a sense of victory heightened by the voices around him.

"*Walked right into it with his eyes wide open.*"

"*I could hear that horn a block away.*"

"*Drunk, maybe. The way he stood right there . . .*"

The only danger now lay in overplaying his hand. He had to watch out for that, had to keep fitting piece after piece of the plan together, and then there would be no danger. He sat in the car while a policeman questioned him with official gravity, and he knew from the growing sympathy in the policeman's voice that he was making the right impression.

No, he was free to go home if he wished. Charges, of course, had to be automatically preferred against him, but the way things looked . . . Yes, they would be glad to phone Mrs. Bolinger. They could drive him home, but if he preferred to have her do it . . .

He had allowed time enough for her to be at home when the call was made, and he spent the next fifteen minutes with the crowd staring at him through the car window with a morbid and sympathetic curiosity. When the station wagon drew up nearby, a lane magically appeared through the crowd; when Claire was at his side the lane disappeared.

Even frightened and bewildered, she was a beautiful woman, Cornelius thought, and, he had to admit to himself, she knew how to put on a sterling show of wifely concern and devotion, false as it was. But perhaps that was because she didn't know yet, and it was time for her to know.

He waited until she had helped him into the station wagon, and when she sat down in the driver's

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seat he put an arm tight around her.

"Oh, by the way, officer," he asked with grave anxiety through the open window. "Did you find out who the man was? Did he have any identification on him?"

The policeman nodded. "Young fellow from the city," he said, "so we'll have to check up on him down there. Name of Lundgren. Robert Lundgren, if his card means anything."

Against his arm Cornelius felt, rather than heard, the choked gasp, felt the uncontrollable small shivering. Her face was as gray as that of the man's out there in the street. "All right, Claire," he said softly. "Let's go home."

She drove by instinct out through the streets of the town. Her face was vacuous, her eyes set and staring. He was almost grateful when they reached the highway, and she finally spoke in a quiet and wondering voice. "You knew," she said. "You knew about it, and you killed him for it."

"Yes," Cornelius said, "I knew about it."

"Then you're crazy," she said dispassionately, her eyes still fixed ahead of her. "You must be crazy to kill someone like that."

Her even, informative tone fired his anger as much as what she was saying.

"It was justice," he said between his teeth. "It was coming to him."

She was still remote. "You don't understand."

"Don't understand what?"

She turned toward him, and he saw that her eyes were glistening wet. "I knew him before I ever knew you, before I ever started working in the office. We always went together; it didn't seem as if there was any point living if we couldn't be together." She paused only a fraction of a second.

"But things didn't go right. He had big ideas that didn't make any money, and I couldn't stand that. I was born poor, and I couldn't stand marrying poor and dying poor . . . That's why I married you. And I tried to be a good wife — you'll never know how hard I tried! — but that wasn't what you wanted. You wanted a showpiece, not a wife; something to parade around in front of people so that they could admire you for owning it, just like they admire you for everything else you own."

"You're talking like a fool," he said harshly. "And watch the road. We turn off here."

"Listen to me!" she said. "I was going to tell you all about it. I was going to ask for a divorce. Not a penny to go with it, or anything like that — just the divorce so that I could marry him and make up for all the time I had thrown away! That's what I told him today, and if you had only asked — only talked to me —"

She would get over it, he thought. It had been even more serious than he had realized, but, as the saying went, *all passes*. She had nothing to trade her marriage for any longer;

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when she understood that clearly they would make a new start. It was a miracle that he had thought of using the weapon he had, and that he had used it so effectively. *A perfect weapon*, the Judge had said. He'd never know how perfect.

It was the warning clangor of the bell at the grade crossing that jarred Cornelius from his reverie — that, and the alarming realization that the car's speed was not slackening at all. Then everything else was submerged by the angry bawling of a Diesel horn, and when he looked up incredulously, it was to the raging mountain of steel that was the Broker's Special hurling itself over the crossing directly ahead.

"Watch out!" he cried out wildly. "My God, what are you doing!"

In that last split second, when her foot went down hard on the accelerator, he knew.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**REX STOUT,** creator of Nero Wolfe
TITLE:	***Santa Claus Beat***
TYPE:	Human Interest Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Art Hipple, precinct dick
LOCALE:	New York City
TIME:	The day before Christmas
COMMENTS:	*The short tale of a "tough cop" who was cynical about Christmas and had no use whatever (he said) for the Yuletide spirit.*

"CHRISTMAS EVE," ART HIPPLE was thinking to himself, "would be a good time for the murder."

The thought was both timely and characteristic. It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon of December 24, and though the murder would have got an eager welcome from Art Hipple any day at all, his disdainful attitude toward the prolonged hurly-burly of Christmas sentiment and shopping made that the best possible date for it. He did not actually turn up his nose at Christmas, for that would have been un-American; but as a New York cop not yet out of his twenties who had recently been made a precinct dick and had hung his uniform in the back of the closet of his furnished room, it had to be made clear, especially to himself, that he was good and tough. A cynical slant on Christmas was therefore imperative.

His hope of running across a murder had begun back in the days when his assignment had been tagging illegally parked cars, and was merely practical and professional. His biggest ambition was promotion to Homicide, and the shortest cut would have been discovery of a corpse, followed by swift, brilliant, solo detection and capture of the culprit. It had not gone so far as becoming an obsession; as he strode down the sidewalk this December afternoon he was not sniffing for the scent of blood at each dingy entrance he passed; but when he reached the number he had been

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given and turned to enter, his hand darted inside his jacket to touch his gun.

None of the three people he found in the cluttered and smelly little room one flight up seemed to need shooting. Art identified himself and wrote down their names. The man at the battered old desk, who was twice Art's age and badly needed a shave, was Emil Duross, proprietor of the business conducted in that room — Duross Specialties, a mail-order concern dealing in gimcrack jewelry. The younger man, small, dark and neat, seated on a chair squeezed in between the desk and shelves stacked with cardboard boxes, was H. E. Koenig, adjuster, according to a card he had proffered, for the Apex Insurance Company. The girl, who had pale watery eyes and a stringy neck, stood backed up to a pile of cartons the height of her shoulder. She had on a dark brown felt hat and a lighter brown woolen coat that had lost a button. Her name was Helen Lauro, and it could have been not rheum in her eyes but the remains of tears.

Because Art Hipple was thorough it took him twenty minutes to get the story to his own satisfaction. Then he returned his notebook to his pocket, looked at Duross, at Koenig, and last at the girl. He wanted to tell her to wipe her eyes, but what if she didn't have a handkerchief?

He spoke to Duross. "Stop me if I'm wrong," he said. "You bought the ring a week ago to give to your wife for Christmas and paid sixty-two dollars for it. You put it there in a desk drawer after showing it to Miss Lauro. Why did you show it to Miss Lauro?"

Duross turned his palms up. "Just a natural thing. She works for me, she's a woman, and it's a beautiful ring."

"Okay. Today you work with her — filling orders, addressing packages, and putting postage on. You send her to the post office with a bag of the packages. Why didn't she take all of them?"

"She did."

"Then what are those?" Art pointed to a pile of little boxes, addressed and stamped, on the end of a table.

"Orders that came in the afternoon mail. I did them while she was gone to the post office."

Art nodded. "And also while she she was gone you looked in the drawer to get the ring to take home for Christmas, and it wasn't there. You know it was there this morning because Miss Lauro asked if she could look at it again, and you showed it to her and let her put it on her finger, and then you put it back in the drawer. But this afternoon it was gone, and you couldn't have taken it yourself because you haven't left this room. Miss Lauro went out and got sandwiches for your lunch. So you decided she took the ring, and you phoned the insurance company, and Mr. Koenig came and advised you to call the police, and —"

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"Only his stock is insured," Koenig put in. "The ring was not a stock item and is not covered."

"Just a legality," Duross declared scornfully. "Insurance companies can't hide behind legalities. It hurts their reputation."

Koenig smiled politely but noncommittally.

Art turned to the girl. "Why don't you sit down?" he asked her. "There's a chair we men are not using."

"I will never sit down in this room again," she declared in a thin tight voice.

"Okay." Art scowled at her. She was certainly not comely. "If you did take the ring you might —"

"I didn't!"

"Very well. But if you did you might as well tell me where it is because you won't ever dare to wear it or sell it."

"Of course I wouldn't. I knew I wouldn't. That's why I didn't take it."

"Oh? You thought of taking it?"

"Of course I did. It was a beautiful ring." She stopped to swallow. "Maybe my life isn't much, but what it is, I'd give it for a ring like that, and a girl like me, I could live a hundred years and never have one. Of course I thought of taking it — but I knew I couldn't ever wear it."

"You see?" Duross applealed to the law. "She's foxy, that girl. She's slick."

Art downed an impulse to cut it short, get out, return to the station house, and write a report. Nobody here deserved anything, not even justice — especially not justice. Writing a brief report was all it rated, and all, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it would have got. But instead of breaking it off, Art sat and thought it over through a long silence, with the three pairs of eyes on him. Finally he spoke to Duross:

"Get me the orders that came in the afternoon mail."

Duross was startled. "Why?"

"I want to check them with that pile of boxes you addressed and stamped."

Duross shook his head. "I don't need a cop to check my orders and shipments. Is this a gag?"

"No. Get me the orders."

"I will not!"

"Then I'll have to open all the boxes." Art arose and headed for the table. Duross bounced up and got in front of him and they were chest to chest.

"You don't touch those boxes," Duross told him. "You got no search warrant. You don't touch anything!"

"That's just another legality." Art backed off a foot to avoid contact. "And since I guessed right, what's a little legality? I'm going to open the boxes here and now, but I'll count ten first to give you a chance to pick it out and hand it to me and save both of us a lot of bother. One, two, three —"

"I'll phone the station house!"

"Go ahead. Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine . . ."

Art stopped at nine because Duross

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had moved to the table and was fingering the boxes. As he drew away with one in his hand Art demanded, "Gimme." Duross hesitated but passed the box over, and after a glance at the address Art ripped the tape off, opened the flap of the box, took out a wad of tissue paper, and then a ring box. From that he removed a ring, yellow gold, with a large greenish stone. Helen Lauro made a noise in her throat. Koenig let out a grunt, evidently meant for applause. Duross made a grab, not for the ring but for the box on which he had put an address, and missed.

"It stuck out as plain as your nose," Art told him, "but of course my going for the boxes was just a good guess. Did you pay sixty-two bucks for this?"

Duross's lips parted, but no words came. Apparently he had none. He nodded, not vigorously.

Art turned to the girl. "Look, Miss Lauro. You say you're through here. You ought to have something to remember it by. You could make some trouble for Mr. Duross for the dirty trick he tried to play on you, and if you lay off I expect he'd like to show his appreciation by giving you this ring. Wouldn't you, Mr. Duross?"

Duross managed to get it out. "Sure I would."

"Shall I give it to her for you?"

"Sure." Duross's jaw worked. "Go ahead."

Art held out the ring and the girl took it, but not looking at it because she was gazing incredulously at him. It was a gaze so intense as to disconcert him, and he covered up by turning to Duross and proffering the box with an address on it.

"Here," he said, "you can have this. Next time you cook up a plan for getting credit with your wife for buying her a ring, and collecting from the insurance company for its cost, and sending the ring to a girl friend — all in one neat little operation — don't do it. And don't forget you gave Miss Lauro that ring before witnesses."

Duross gulped and nodded.

Koenig spoke. "Your name is not Hipple, officer, it's Santa Claus. You have given her the ring she would have given her life for, you have given him an out on a charge of attempted fraud, and you have given me a crossoff on a claim. That's the ticket! That's the old yuletide spirit! Merry Christmass!"

"Nuts," Art said contemptuously, and turned and marched from the room, down the stairs, and out to the sidewalk. As he headed in the direction of the station house he decided that he would tone it down a little in his report. Getting a name for being tough was okay, but not too damn tough. That insurance guy sure was dumb, calling him Santa Claus — him, Art Hipple, feeling as he did about Christmas.

Which reminded him, Christmas Eve would be a swell time for the murder.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: KEM BENNETT

TITLE: *The Queer Fish*

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALES: Pendennick, Cornwall, and other places

COMMENTS: *Imagine, if you will, three such writers as W. W. Jacobs, Guy Gilpatric, and Eric Knight joining their talents in a single story. What a sheer delight a collaboration like that would have produced! Well, here is a more than reasonable facsimile . . .*

AT FIVE THIRTY THE BUZZER WENT and Albert Pascoe stopped shoveling china clay in the hold of the Danish freighter, *Langeland.*

At five thirty-five, in company with fifty other dockers, and with a half a liter of smuggled *aquavit* in a ketchup bottle in his pocket, Albert walked past the policeman on duty at the dock gates. Then, and then only, did he permit himself to let go a breath of gusty relief which shifted a cloud of white dust from the hairs of his stubby mustache.

The ferry was waiting and Albert [redacted]t aboard. He was a short, stiff [redacted] in middle-age, filled with good [redacted]re, argument, and Cornish in[redacted]ndence. When they were halfway across the estuary, Harry Sims, the ferryman, came up and remarked conversationally, "Evening, Albert."

"Evening, Harry," replied Albert pleasantly.

"They'm running, boy."

Albert blinked at the ferryman. "They be?" He went to the side and stared down into the clear water, thinking of great silver fish. A moment later he thought of his fine net, hanging in the woodshed behind his cottage, and of his boat, moored half a mile upstream. Then, sourly, he remembered Herbert Whiteway, the water-bailiff, and spat his disgust overboard.

The law said that the salmon had to be left in peace to finish their journey to the spawning grounds at the head of the Fowey River. The law enforced its opinion with the threat of a fifty pound fine. Albert winced, then spat again, in disgust and for the more practical reason

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that he needed to rid his throat of a layer of china clay.

The ferry came to a stop at the slip below Pendennick, whose single street plunged like a madman's ski-jump. Albert paid his fare — a penny — and started to clump slowly up the hill to the top, where lay his cottage and where the rolling Cornish farmland started, with its fat cattle, gull-dotted ploughland, and sleek hawks sitting on the telegraph posts.

Presently he pushed open the door of his whitewashed cottage. Children fluttered into movement like a flock of starlings and he patted heads absent-mindedly. At the stove, Alice turned from frying chipped potatoes. She looked down at him. "You're back then."

"Arrh," Albert said, smiling sheepishly. For fifteen years his beloved wife had been making him feel sheepish. He no longer minded, for it had become a habit, like having children, drinking beer, smuggling *aquavit*, poaching salmon, and keeping his nose clean. "What's for tea?" he asked.

"Nice bit of pollack and chips."

He nodded, without vast enthusiasm. "Salmon are running."

Alice turned. Six foot two. Built like an oak tree. "Let 'em run," she said. "You leave your net be, d'you hear?"

"Yes, my dear," Albert said, then added with grievance in his voice, "Who said aught about the net? Never crossed my mind."

Alice grunted. "Go and get washed," she said. "Tea's nearly ready."

Shortly after seven that evening Albert shut the door of his cottage behind him and started downhill towards *The Lugger*. As he walked he leaned slightly backwards to compensate for the gradient and brought his best drinking boots down hard, so that the nails would bite. He had the ketchup bottle in his pocket and at the back of his mouth there lingered the regurgitory sweetness of well-fried potatoes. He was content.

There were six other customers in the public bar of *The Lugger* — three regulars who were his cronies, two strangers, and Herbert Whiteway, the water-bailiff. Albert ignored Whiteway; he was not yet in the mood to start pulling his leg, which was all the man was good for. Instead, from his favorite seat on a high-backed oak settle by the fire, he surveyed the strangers. There had been a fat new car outside, he remembered; they must belong to it.

They had white faces and soft hands and their clothes were uncomfortably new. They were restless and when they spoke they did so in undertones. They were drinking brandy, which was unheard of in *The Lugger*, and they didn't even look if they were enjoying it. Al shrugged inwardly: city fellow no knowing what went on in t heads. No concern of his — not u April, anyway. In April, Albert wo cease to be a docker and becom

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boatman. Then strangers would have some interest for him, if they wished to go out fishing or take a trip to Polperro or Mevagissy; now they had none. He dismissed the two men from his thoughts as if they had already returned to London, or Mars, or wherever it was that they followed their mysterious livelihood.

Presently he took the ketchup bottle out of his pocket and stared at it. He unscrewed the top and sniffed. He put the neck to his lips and tilted his head back. A fire started behind his uvula. Albert happily let it burn for a few seconds, then reached for the pint of bitter beer on the table in front of him and quenched the fire. Vapors wreathed round the back of his palate. *Arrh.*

From across the room, Herbert Whiteway was watching, envy in his small eyes. Albert beamed at him. "Physic," he said. "Doctor give it me for me guts. Proper tasty, 'tis."

The bar shook with laughter. Only Herbert Whiteway did not laugh. Even the strangers smiled palely. Albert took out his pipe and a rope of twist from a tin in his pocket; he cut a few slivers from the tobacco and started to roll them between the palms of his small, hard hands. Then he said conversationally, "Harry Sims told me they was running, Herbert."

Whiteway said, "So they may be."

" 'Tis early for they."

No reply. Albert took a pull at his beer and lit his pipe. "If you ask me," he said blandly, "they'm not Cornish fish at all, boy."

The bar was suddenly silent. It was the old joke, the good joke, the joke that never failed.

Whiteway fell for it, as usual. "Gerraway!" he said. "Talk sense, man."

"They'm Canadian steelheads." Albert's voice was pontifical, the voice of a man pronouncing dogma. "They'm Canadians driven over by the porps, and as such they can be fished."

Whiteway said nastily, "If I catch you fishing them before February month I'll have you up before the bench, all the same. Fifty pound or three months it'll cost you — unless you can get the fish to show a Canadian passport, haha!"

Nobody laughed. Albert stared blandly at the bailiff, saying nothing. He let the poor joke fall, flatten, fail, and by its very failure recoil upon its originator. Then, at last, he said smugly, "You didn't ought to make threats like that, boy. You'm a public servant. 'Tis up to you to keep a civil tongue in your head, now."

There was a pause, loaded with hatred. Whiteway drained the half pint of rough cider called "scrumpy" that was all his parsimony would permit him to drink and rose to his feet, a long-faced, stooping, miserable man. "You're a poaching, sneering, smuggling good-for-nothing, Pascoe," he said thickly. "One day it'll be my turn to laugh, and I don't mind how soon it comes, so I'm warning you!"

The door slammed shut behind him. Albert stared at it sorrowfully.

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Always the same trouble: the man would never stay long enough to have his leg pulled proper. "Arrh!" he said, "the . . . !" and the word he used was libelous. He tilted his ketchup bottle again, wiped his lips on the back of his hand, and glanced round the bar. "Who's for a game of darts?"

At ten o'clock time was called. The strangers had left some time before. Only the regulars remained. They drained their glasses slowly, taking their time because beer tasted all the better after hours. Eventually they drifted towards the door. Somebody said, "Going upalong, Albert?"

Albert stood in the open door. The night was clear and soft and the stars were out. He was not drunk — half the contents of the ketchup bottle remained, scrupulously saved for another occasion — but he was warm with drink. He shook his head. "Not yet awhile, Charlie," he said. "I got to fetch something from the boat. G'night all."

She was called the *Alice*, and she lay at her winter moorings half a mile upriver from Pendennick. She was the pride of Albert's life, a twenty-three-foot fishing boat converted to a day cruiser with a small, stuffy cabin forward, a glassed-in shelter for the steersman, and a well aft from which the seats were removable when the space was needed for fishing. She had an old-fashioned main engine and a smaller, more modern wing engine. With both going, the *Alice* could plough through the water at eight knots, but at that speed she was inclined to be smelly and she shook and chattered like a cement mixer.

The tide was falling. Albert left the road and trudged across shingle to sit on a rock at the water's edge. He had lied when he said he needed to fetch something from the boat; in fact, he had just wanted to look at her, to plan the things he would do to her when the time for refitting came, and to dream about Easter. At Easter the tourists started coming, which, for Albert, meant money in the pocket and, better still, liberation from the detestable necessity of working as a docker. Roll on, Easter!

His pipe had gone out. Dreamily, Albert reached in his pocket for matches.

Then, without warning, a voice in the darkness behind him said, "Don't move, please."

Albert did move. He jumped uncontrollably. A man appeared at his side. Albert looked up, his eyes wide with astonishment. It was one of the strangers he had seen in *The Lugger*. The stranger had a pistol in his right hand.

Slowly, Albert put his unlit pipe in his mouth.

"Is that your boat?" the stranger asked. "If so, my friend and I would like to hire her."

"I'll not talk to 'ee till that pistol's put away," Albert said grimly.

"Yes, you will." The stranger's voice, in which there was a trace of foreign intonation, was harsh and

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cold. "Be sensible. We can take the boat if we want to. We're giving you the chance to make a little money, my friend, and to keep your boat into the bargain. Is she seaworthy?"

"She be," Albert said, with sullen pride in his voice.

"Would she take us to France?"

The pipe came out of Albert's mouth. "To France! You'm reckoning to go to France — now, in my *Alice*?"

"Yes."

"Arrh! Talk sense, mister."

"Will she get us there?"

Albert shrugged. He looked lovingly at the *Alice*, and pride stirred his tongue again. "She would," he said, "but she aren't going to."

"Why not?"

"Because, for one thing, 'tis agin the law."

The man beside him smiled with one side of his mouth. "We were in the inn tonight," he said. "From what we heard it did not seem that you were a man to take the law too seriously." Albert said nothing. "If you'll take us to France we'll give you fifty pounds," the stranger continued. "If not, I shall have to shoot you before we leave because we cannot afford to let you raise the alarm."

There was a long silence. Albert looked at the *Alice* and at the pistol in the man's hand. He scratched his nose with the stem of his pipe. An inward voice was telling him that this cool-tongued, white-faced stranger did not make empty threats. He would shoot, if necessary. And then Alice and the kids would be alone and he, Albert Pascoe, would be floating face-downwards in cold green water with the salmon flashing by him on their way to spawn. Sweat stood out on his forehead. He made a sudden, violent gesture with his hand. "You'm barmy! France! In the middle of the night with no charts!" He pointed his pipe at the *Alice*. "She'm a day cruiser, mister. She don't belong to do this kind of thing." A new thought struck him and he added flatly, "Anyway there's no more than a gallon of petrol in her tanks, so that's that."

The stranger said quietly, "We have petrol — fifty gallons in cans in the back of our car. The need for it had occurred to us."

The silence returned. Albert shifted on his rock, restless, glancing at the pistol — and at his *Alice*, as if she might be able to tell him what to do. The stranger said impatiently, "Well?"

Albert shrugged. "Seems I shall have to take 'ee, mister," he said sullenly. "But 'tis agin the law and good sense and you'll maybe not see tomorrow if the weather blows up."

The stranger smiled. "We shall be happy to take the risk," he said. "Now give my friend some help with the petrol."

Fifteen minutes later the *Alice* had full tanks and a reserve of six four-gallon jerrycans aboard. While Albert made preparations to start the cold engines the stranger stood over him with the gun. The other man drove

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the car away and came back on foot.

Albert said, "She'm ready to go now if you'm still set on it."

"We are," the stranger said. "Do you know the French coast?"

"I been there."

"Do you know of a place where you could put us ashore secretly?"

"I reckon I might find a place on the Brittany coast," Albert said unwillingly. " 'Tis a risky business."

"How long will it take?"

" 'Bout fifteen hours, if the weather holds."

There was a silence. Then the man with the gun snarled, "Fifteen hours! You're lying! It should not take that long."

Albert looked at him. "I'm not lying," he said quietly. "If you reckon you'm able to get her there quickerer, you'm welcome to try."

The back of the stranger's hand came slashing out of the darkness. It caught Albert on the cheek, knocking his head back and making his ears ring painfully. He made a noise in his throat and moved forwards, his hands reaching out. The black eye of the pistol stared at him. He dropped his hands. "That was for insolence and to show you that we can be harsh if necessary," the stranger said. "Now let us go, and if I think you are trying any tricks I shall shoot you. Understand?"

Albert said nothing. He stooped to swing the handle of the main engine. It fired. He set the throttle and turned to the wheel. The second stranger cast off.

As the *Alice* pulled away from her mooring and crept down the estuary towards the sea, Albert was staring fixedly into the darkness ahead, the set of his lips making his mustache jut angrily forwards.

Two men saw the *Alice* crawl out of Fowey harbor. One was the coastguard on duty on the hill above the harbor-mouth, who noted down that she had left but took no other action. The second was Herbert Whiteway. Having a one-track mind, Whiteway instantly jumped to the conclusion that Albert was out after salmon. With excitement gleaming in his pale eyes the water-bailiff wrapped himself in many coats, got out his dinghy, and rowed quietly across the estuary to take up a position of concealment under the lee of the jetties opposite Pendennick. There he stayed, nursing the conviction that Albert was merely waiting for the tide to be right before he started netting.

In the early hours of morning the southwesterly wind which prevails in Cornish waters sprang up and quickly freshened until it was blowing half a gale. When Herbert Whiteway got home he was a sadder and wetter, if not wiser, man.

However, at breakfast time there was something to cheer him up. He opened his morning paper to see headlines blacker than usual across the front page: *Cabinet Minister's Suicide. Blackmail Suspected.* And beneath the headlines two photographs, under which the text read: *The two*

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men above are wanted for questioning, since they may be carrying vital state secrets. They were prevented from leaving the country at Southampton yesterday, but broke custody and escaped in a stolen car.

A few minutes later, in the Fowey police station, Whiteway leaned eagerly over the counter. "Them two men," he panted. "I seen them in *The Lugger* last night."

The policeman behind the counter was infuriatingly calm. He nodded. "Yes, mate. So did the landlord. You'm a bit late."

Whiteway scowled. "Albert Pascoe took the *Alice* out last night," he said with angry malice. "She's not back yet. I reckon he took them two fellows with him."

At half-past two in the afternoon Albert cut the *Alice's* wing engine and throttled down the main. It was blowing hard. The sky was leaden with racing clouds through which there were no gaps for the sun to shine. A hundred yards away, waves with wind-broken crests crashed into foam against the black needles of rock with cliffs behind them. But between the rocks there was a channel and beyond the channel fairly calm water and a cove with a gently sloping beach.

Albert went to the cabin door. "We'm there," he said. "If you'm willing to risk it I'll try to put you ashore."

The two strangers were half sitting, half lying in a huddle of sick agony amid the litter of the cabin. The leader, the one with the pistol, looked up, swallowed bile frantically, and lurched to his feet. When he was outside, Albert pointed. The stranger stared at the tumult of the waves and shut his eyes. "France?" he whispered.

"That's right," Albert said.

"Can you get the boat in . . . in there?"

"I reckon."

The stranger nodded, gripping the side of the wheelhouse so hard that his knuckles were as white as chalk. Albert swung the *Alice's* bows towards the little beach. White water broke over her. She staggered and yawed and swooped like a storm-tossed sea gull, but miraculously she missed the rocks. Gently, gently, Albert nosed her into the beach. The strangers were ready. Albert put his hand out. "Fifty pound," he said.

A sodden envelope came out of a coat pocket and was pressed into his hand. In their waterlogged city clothes the two men clambered over the bows and lurched up the beach. Albert shouted, "Gimme a shove off!" — but they ignored him. He spat, then smiled a grimly happy smile: at least he was shut of them, and that was good.

The *Alice's* engines throbbed. Water boiled at her stern. Albert hopped over the side, heaved, hopped back in again, soaked to the skin. The *Alice* slid backwards slowly, her keel grating on the sand. Helm hard over, and she came round. A tooth of

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rock reached out for her but she seemed somehow to dodge. And then she was in open water.

Albert rubbed the salt out of his eyes. He spared a glance over his shoulder and saw the two strangers searching for a way up the cliffs. Then he opened the envelope he had been given. It was full of wet newspaper.

The police found the strangers' car hidden among bushes close to the place where the *Alice* had been moored. That was at nine o'clock in the morning. By ten o'clock messages had gone to London, and from London to Paris and from Paris to Brittany. Watchers on the bleak Brittany coastline saw nothing of the *Alice*, nor of the wanted men.

The R.A.F. were asked to fly sorties in an attempt to locate the boat. They did, but the weather defeated them and they saw nothing.

Alice Pascoe spent the day in the coastguard's hut above Fowey harbor, having left her children in the care of a neighbor.

By half-past six in the evening Albert was very tired. He had tied a loop of cord round his wrist and fastened the other end to one of the spokes of the *Alice's* wheel, so that the tugging of the wheel would awaken him if he chanced to sleep.

The wind had lessened, and the waves no longer showed white caps. The *Alice* rode the swell with a neat, swooping motion that would have unraveled the stomach of a landsman but which Albert found to be soothing. In spite of his tiredness he was glad — glad to be alive, glad to going home — even glad, in a way that he did not fully understand, that the strangers had robbed him of his promised fifty pounds.

He upended his ketchup bottle for the last time at six thirty-five, stared regretfully at its utter emptiness and then pitched it over the side.

Dusk was coming down as he sighted the landmark of the Gribben, a peak of black and yellow cliff a mile or so west of Fowey. He left the wheel for a moment, and went to stoop in the cabin entrance in order to light his pipe. It was when he straightened, puffing hard, that he saw the first porpoises. Three of their black backs wheeled a few yards away, the triangular dorsal fins cutting up, over, and down again into the water in a movement of slow poetry.

And ahead of the gliding porpoises a great salmon leaped. More porpoises wheeled. Another salmon broke the surface; then a third and a fourth — and the fourth was so close to the *Alice* that it almost jumped aboard.

Like a man in a dream Albert flipped the throttles down and went to the cabin. After rummaging for a few seconds he found what he was looking for, a rusty old gaff on the end of a six-foot pole. He went to the side of the boat and leaned over, staring fixedly into the water. Porpoises and salmon showed nearby but he did not raise his head.

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Then there came a gleam of silver and a splash right under the lee of the almost stationary boat. Albert struck, his hands as skilled with the gaff as the hands of a pianist on the keyboard. He felt the gaff bite, and he gave a great heave, staggering backwards into the well of the boat. He stared down with happy incredulity at the full-grown, twenty-pound cock salmon that he had snatched from the beaks of the porpoises. Then alarm struck at him. Herbert Whiteway! Fifty pound or three months! He glanced about him. The sea was deserted. Arrh, who could have seen?

On his knees he touched the salmon. "You'm a beauty, my dear — you'm a real beauty!"

They were waiting for him at the Town Quay — Alice, Herbert Whiteway, ten reporters, most of the inhabitants of Fowey, four dogs, and an Inspector of Police. Albert brought the *Alice* in smartly, hugging the splendid guilty knowledge of the salmon to himself. He cut the engines, flicked a rope's end round a bollard, and made her fast. He stumped soggily up the steps and kissed Alice. Cameras clicked.

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to come with me, Mr. Pascoe."

Albert looked up into the face of the police inspector. He nodded. "Now?"

"Yes."

In the police car the inspector said, "You took two men in your boat last night?"

"I had to," Albert said gruffly. "They forced me with a pistol, like."

"Did you land them?" The policeman's voice was urgent.

"Arrh."

"Do you know exactly where?"

"Surely," Albert said. "I put they ashore in a cove, not far from St. Levan."

The inspector peered down at a map on his knees, his forefinger following a coastline. Albert watched him. He coughed. "Excuse me."

"Yes?"

"You got the wrong chart, sir. St. Levan, I said. 'Tis not far from Land's End."

The police inspector's head came up and the map of Brittany slid off his lap onto the floor of the car. His eyes were wide with astonishment. "In Cornwall!"

Albert grinned. " 'Twas when I last saw it," he said, then added, "I reckoned they two had no business to be asking to go to France in the middle of the night. I reckoned they was bad ones, so I went out to sea for an hour or two and then, when the weather worsened, I come round in a big circle. There was no sun to say I was changing course, and anyway they was proper seasick by then. Didn't ask no questions. I told they it was France and they went ashore. Glad to be on dry land, I reckon." He chuckled. "If you'm after those two, sir, they'll be there still unless they swum for it. To my knowledge there's no way up the cliffs from that cove at all."

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After his visit to the police station, Albert was driven back to the Town Quay as an honored guest. With the inspector's friendly hand on his shoulder he walked proudly through the crowd that was still waiting.

But when he caught sight of Herbert Whiteway he stopped in his tracks. The water-bailiff was standing in the *Alice*, his face gleeful with triumph and malice. Albert's salmon lay on a piece of sacking at the water-bailiff's feet.

Albert swallowed. Dismay hit him, as well as anger and a sense of bitter unfairness. Alice was there, her face glum with disaster. He looked at her for a moment and then lowered his eyes. Before he could say anything, the police inspector's surprisingly soft voice sounded. "Something wrong, Mr. Whiteway?"

"Nothing wrong, sir," Whiteway said creamily. "I was watching Pascoe come in through my glasses and I saw him gaff a fish. I found this salmon hidden under tarpaulins in the cabin of his boat."

There was a silence. Albert looked up. He took a deep breath and was about to launch himself into a hopeless defense when the inspector said softly, "Salmon? That doesn't look like a salmon to me, Mr. Whiteway. I'd say it was a fine big bass."

The water-bailiff stared. He lowered his eyes, glanced for a moment at the salmon at his feet, then looked up again. "A bass!" he said squeakily. "You mean . . ."

"I mean that as far as the police are concerned that is a *bass*, Mr. Whiteway. I'm sorry to disappoint you. Good afternoon."

Albert swallowed again. He looked at the inspector, at Herbert Whiteway, whose mouth was hanging open, and at the salmon. For once he could think of nothing to say.

Alice stepped into the breach. "I'll thank you to put that fish back where you found it, Mr. Whiteway, and step out of our boat," she said in a loud voice. Then, as a roar of delighted laughter rose from the crowded quay, she went down the steps like a duchess with Albert behind her, smiling.

YOU CAN WIN $1,000!

See the February issue of EQMM for details

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Here is a fascinating and extremely unusual tale of pure detection — contemporary in its substance and style, classical in its deductive technique . . . indeed, the very model of a modern medical mystery in which Dr. Lerner, on the day before his retirement, proves himself a worthy disciple of R. Austin Freeman's Dr. Thorndyke and a brilliant colleague of Lawrence G. Blochman's Dr. Coffee.

THE OTHER ARROW

by F. M. BARRATT and JACK FINNEY

"WELL, HERE IT IS," THE OLD doctor said, as the car swung into a side street. "The last call I'll ever make." The young man at the wheel glanced at him, but the old man was smiling, so he smiled, too. "I've always hated this case," Dr. Lerner said a minute later. "I'll be glad to drop it on your shoulders."

"Oh? Why?"

Dr. Lerner was already rebuking himself for having said too much. He'd better let young Dr. Knapp acquire his own prejudices. So he simply answered, "Because there's never any place to park."

As they approached the corner of Third Avenue, the young man slowed, then stopped the car at a parking space so small Dr. Lerner would have passed it by. He backed the car neatly into it.

Dr. Lerner was happy today. "Most valuable ability a New York doctor can have," he said, and grinned. He was a big old man, tall and wide. His face was lined, his black-and-white hair was very thick, and there was something old-fashioned about his appearance — possibly the gold watch chain across his vest. "Two patients here." He nodded at the corner drug store. "A man and his wife, the Prines. He runs the drugstore, and they live in the apartment above it." Dr. Lerner leaned forward, fumbling for his black bag on the floor of the car. "Precarious cases, both of them. She's a diabetic, he's a cardiac, and their lives depend on a delicate artificial balance, maintained with insulin in her case, nitroglycerin in his. They don't take illness too well."

I'm glad I'll never have to come here again. The sentence formed itself, but he didn't speak it. "I've seen cases of physical disability," he went on carefully, "which actually ennobled the patient. Mediocrities turned into something more, by a physical handicap. But these two took the opposite road. Each is wrapped up in his own problems, incapable of giving or receiving the sympathy and under-

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standing each needs from the other." *They hate each other*, he thought; *I'm glad I'm nearly finished with this case.*

The drug store was closed, dark, and empty, Dr. Lerner noticed, mildly surprised, and the two men walked toward the front door. The young doctor was as tall as Dr. Lerner but 40 pounds heavier, and his young face was open and amiably intelligent. *Attending Chicago druggists' convention*, a typewritten notice taped to the door read; *Back Monday A.M.* Meanwhile customers were directed to a nearby drug store for emergency prescriptions.

As they walked back to the side-street entrance that led upstairs to the Prines' apartment, Dr. Lerner said, "Well, no matter; you'll meet Prine next time. Not much to do for him, anyway. He might live thirty years, with good luck. With bad luck, his heart could go tomorrow. He knows that, and he's pretty self-contained. She's the problem here — an invalid personality, a true hypochondriac, if the term isn't out of fashion in modern medicine." He smiled and winked at the young doctor beside him.

"Mostly, the job here," Dr. Lerner went on, as he and Dr. Knapp climbed the stairs, "is to quiet her fears from visit to visit, as best you can. When you leave, give her husband some harmless prescription for whatever she feels is wrong with her. A pill one time, a capsule, or something in a bottle, the next. Her prescriptions are free." He glanced at the younger man. "Don't look so shocked, boy. Prine knows what I'm doing, of course. Every doctor issues harmless prescriptions for the chronic complainers, and every pharmacist fills them. Perfectly ethical, and sound therapeutics. Last time," he said, "I prescribed gelatin capsules filled with distilled water for Mrs. Prine. One before each meal, for indigestion. They'll cure it, too."

Upstairs, the door to the Prine apartment stood ajar. Dr. Lerner pressed the bell button, and waited, feeling good; he expected to live in good health for fifteen more years, and to read a thousand more books.

There was no answering movement inside, and after a moment Dr. Lerner rang the bell again. This time, it seemed to him, it sounded emptily inside the apartment, and when he took his finger off the button, it was very quiet.

He pushed the door open, and stepped into the living room. Mrs. Prine — he saw her immediately through the wide doorway to the kitchen — was seated at the plastic-topped kitchen table, the upper half of her body lying across it, her head down on one cheek between her sprawled arms, facing them. Dr. Lerner hurried toward her, lumbering and stiff, but when he reached Mrs. Prine and lifted her arm, it was cold, and when he let go, the arm thumped woodenly back onto the table top. Rigor mortis was advanced.

Now, 45 years from medical school and the dissecting laboratories, Dr. Lerner still hated, undiminishedly, the occasional necessity for studying

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a dead face, but he did so nevertheless. Mrs. Prine's thin, joyless features were contorted into a final realization of the many fears she had lived with. The rigid muscles held her pale lips drawn back in a silent snarl. The exposed teeth, their surfaces dried, were a dull white. It was a miserable death — the face showed it — and fury rose up in Dr. Lerner: the feeling of impotence and guilt over losing a patient, whatever the cause. To accept a death was always hard; to accept this one, in the final moments of his career, was nearly impossible.

On the table, in the midst of the paper wrappings it had come in, stood an insulin bottle, its flat rubber top punctured. Beside it lay a hypodermic syringe, the plunger down, the shiny needle tip dulled with a fleck of dried blood. Obviously she had taken her morning insulin shot, and now Dr. Lerner felt certain of the cause of death. "Ever seen death by insulin shock, Doctor?" he said brutally, glaring at the young face with the look of the intern still on it. "Then take a good look; it's all fine experience."

He was venting his rage and frustration on the young doctor, and he knew it and was ashamed.

Now the old man allowed himself to cross the room and sink down, trembling, into a chrome kitchen chair at the wall. "She was an experienced diabetic!" he cried out protestingly. Momentarily confused, young Dr. Knapp frowned uncomprehendingly, and, in his irritation, Dr. Lerner spelled it out for him. "Look, boy," he said angrily, "why does a diabetic take insulin? Because his body won't supply it naturally, and the body *must* have insulin to convert the sugar it ingests at every meal. So what happens when you get too much insulin? The excess insulin will burn up all the sugar in your body! And you go into shock."

His anger suddenly gone, Dr. Lerner continued, and the tone of his voice was an apology. "But Mrs. Prine knew that, Doctor, just as well as we do. She'd had an insulin shot twice a day before meals for the last eleven years. She knew what the warning symptoms of insulin shock felt like, and she knew what to do about it." He shook his head, baffled. "It's so simple! When a diabetic feels shock symptoms, he simply eats sugar. And the sugar counteracts the excess insulin. Every diabetic knows that! There's no *need* to die of insulin shock!" He frowned suddenly, peering across the room. "Do you see her sugar container anywhere on the table? She carried it in a small match box."

At the table, Dr. Knapp glanced down. "Yes, it's here. It's open." He stooped to look into the little metal box: "And empty."

"Then she *did* take her sugar." His eyes baffled, Dr. Lerner murmured, "I don't understand it. Of all her worries, insulin shock was the real one, and she always kept that little matchbox crammed with sugar. Ate with it beside her, slept with it under her pillow, never took a step without it.

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So she took sugar today, all right, the moment she felt shock symptoms." . . . He glanced quickly about the room, hunting the answer to this puzzle.

On the drainboard of the sink stood an open tin of dry mustard, and beside it a nearly empty glass of yellow-brown fluid. "Mustard and water — an emetic," the old man said, his voice stunned. "My God, she took an emetic, and got *rid* of the sugar!"

Dr. Knapp crossed the room. He looked carefully at the sink. "Yes," he said, his voice subdued, "she did, all right. There are particles of undissolved sugar cubes here; she must have gotten rid of the sugar within seconds after she took it." Anxious to demonstrate his own medical knowledge, he added, "She didn't leave the sugar in her stomach long enough for the excess insulin to absorb it. No wonder she died of shock."

The old man came to the sink. Dr. Knapp was right; there lay the damp fragments of the sugar cubes Mrs. Prine had chewed up and swallowed. And with them he saw, before he turned away, the pathetic capsule of water she had taken at his direction, for indigestion. "Well," he said bitterly, "she'll never suffer from indigestion, real or imaginary, any more, or fear of insulin shock, or anything else."

He turned blindly into the living room, fighting the knowledge that this was his fault; this was one he had bungled. Then he said it aloud. "Well, Doctor," he said, "the last day of my career, and high time it ended. I treated that poor woman's fears with useless, childish remedies, and there in the kitchen you see the result." He stopped at the windows, and stared down at the street. "Suicide," he said wearily.

"Suicide?" Dr. Knapp's tone was doubtful.

Dr. Lerner swung around. "Why not?" he asked, swift hope in his voice. He had never really liked Mrs. Prine, but he furiously did not want her to have died, in this most miserable of ways, because someone had bungled.

"Well, after all" — the young man shrugged — "she did take sugar to counteract the shock. Took her digestion capsule and had breakfast, besides. Now, what kind of suicide is that?"

"A typical kind!" the old man snapped. "Like most of them, a deep, long-standing urge to die, plus a spur-of-the-moment decision to do it!" He made himself quiet down. "Son, she didn't have the cold nerve for planned suicide. But at some point — we'll never know how or why — she was able to make up her mind suddenly; it's a sort of wild hysteria with that kind. Maybe took an extra shot of insulin; I don't see why her normal dose should produce shock. But then, when the shock begins, she loses her nerve — and goes for the sugar. Now, she's safe, and instantly the pendulum swings back again. Once more she wants to die, and so she gets rid of the sugar immediately. Talk to the police,

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son! They've seen suicides teeter on a building ledge, working up their courage, then losing it, over and over again. Talk to a pathologist. Insulin suicides do happen."

He stood waiting, anxious for some contradiction of his theory, but Dr. Knapp was anxious to get away from the place. "Shouldn't we phone the police?" he said.

"Certainly we'll phone the police!" the old man said angrily. "But where's the hurry? Boy," he said desperately, "I owe something more to Mrs. Prine than this." He gestured savagely toward the kitchen. "This was my case, my responsibility, for eleven years. Damn it, I won't *let* it end like this!" His voice softened; he was pleading. "Don't just take my word, son; diagnose the case, the way you would any other."

Dr. Lerner began pacing the room. "How do *you* diagnose?" he asked feverishly. "Here's how I do it. In my mind, I picture little arrows swaying like compass needles, as I go through the symptoms. If they all steady, finally, and point the same way, the diagnosis is clear, and I act on it. But sometimes, *if you hunt for it*, you'll find one little arrow, hidden in with the rest, that points in the opposite direction. Never ignore it!" His eyes were glittering. "If it won't swing around and line up with the others, be certain it's only a red herring before you drop it. Because sometimes, boy, all the others will swing around to line up with it! Find me the other arrow, son; go over this for any sign, big or little, that points in any direction but suicide."

For a moment, feeling something of the old man's battle, Dr. Knapp stared at him, his eyes widened in thought. Then he sighed, and shook his head.

"All right, son," the old doctor said. "Let's phone the police. I wonder what she thought, at the very last," he murmured. "I wonder what she felt, and if she was sorry. I hope she wasn't afraid."

"I wonder." The young doctor nodded, his imagination and sympathy engaged. Then his eyes widened suddenly, and he turned into the kitchen to squat beside the table, peering under Mrs. Prine's body. "Yes!" he said then, answering the question that had arisen in his mind. "She did! She left a note!"

Dr. Lerner squatted beside Dr. Knapp. Just visible, far under Mrs. Prine's motionless chest, lay a white corner of paper, and Dr. Lerner began forcing his big-veined old hand under the weight of Mrs. Prine's body.

"Shouldn't we leave that for the police?" Dr. Knapp said nervously.

Not bothering to answer, Dr. Lerner pulled the little paper free, bringing a pencil stub rolling out onto the table with it. The tremulous handwriting and the way the words were run together made it plain that Mrs. Prine hadn't even had strength enough to lift the pencil from the paper as she wrote her last note. Nor had she had the strength to finish it. *Poisoninsu* — her final note said, the

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last word trailing off unfinished. "Poison insulin," Dr. Knapp's stunned voice whispered.

"Yes," the old man murmured, staring down at the little bottle of insulin on the table. Then he reached out, picked it up, and stood looking at it. "By God, she was murdered!" he said.

"You think the insulin was poisoned?"

For seconds the old doctor didn't answer. Then he said quietly, "No; in spite of this note. Because what kind of fool plan for murder would that be?" He looked up at Dr. Knapp. "It would be idiotic — certain and immediate conviction. And while Prine may be a murderer, he isn't a fool." Idly he shook the fluid in the little bottle, staring at it thoughtfully. "No," he said contemptuously, "the police will test this, of course, but there'll be no poison in it. And yet, nevertheless, that is no suicide note; it's an accusation of murder." His eyes narrowed as he stared at the thin-rubber top which covered the mouth of the bottle. Then he nodded at the paper wrappings on the table. "This is a new bottle," he said slowly. "She used it for the first time this morning."

Dr. Knapp nodded, waiting.

"But there are two puncture holes in the rubber cap," the old man pointed out. "A hypodermic needle has been in here twice."

"Doctor Lerner, you don't want this to be suicide, and I can't blame you," the young man said. "But now you're reaching; you're trying too hard. There are two holes in the rubber cap because she made them both. Took her normal shot before breakfast, later decided on suicide, and took another."

"And the note?" Dr. Lerner asked.

The young man shook his head. "Written in shock — you can't make too much out of that. And, after all, a double dose of insulin *was* poison for her. Which is probably all that she meant. There at the last, her mind was confused, and she was simply trying to explain what happ —"

"Don't diagnose, Doctor, by explaining away a contradiction! That note is an accusation of murder!"

"All right!" Dr. Knapp shrugged irritably. "*If* they find poison in that bottle! But you say that they won't."

The old man shook his head. "They won't. Prine isn't crazy. But suicide?" Again he shook his head. "No. I say this note points squarely away from it; the diagnosis must be re-examined.

"Doctor," he went on gently, "at least consider a new diagnosis. For the moment, at least, let's turn away from suicide. Now, if this is not suicide, then a normal dosage is all she extracted from that bottle this morning — and her normal dosage should not produce shock. So tell me: How could someone make certain that her normal injection *would* induce fatal shock?"

Dr. Knapp stared at him.

Again Dr. Lerner shook the fluid in the little bottle. "When they test this, I am quite sure they won't find

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poison. But I wonder," he said softly, "if they won't find *double-strength* insulin?" He looked at the young man. "U-40, the label says, and for Mrs. Prine that is normal strength. But with a hypodermic needle, it would be quite simple to withdraw the insulin originally in this bottle, and replace it with, say, U-100 — more than double-strength insulin, and probably fatal for Mrs. Prine. And then rewrap the bottle. There are two punctures in the bottle cap. I think that's exactly what happened!"

"Who's twisting the diagnosis now?" The young doctor's voice was dubious. "To quote you, what kind of fool plan for murder would that be? It would make certain she'd take double-strength insulin, yes. But she'd be just as certain to take sugar and counteract the shock that would follow!" For a moment he paused, then added quietly, "As she did."

Dr. Lerner nodded. "Yes, she did. When she felt the symptoms of insulin shock, she was certain to take sugar to counteract it. But suppose it was equally certain that she would immediately get rid of that sugar before it could possibly counteract the insulin? Suppose, in other words, that it was certain she would take an emetic? As she did."

The young doctor stared at him.

"Doctor," the old man said, "we look toward suicide, and we interpret all the signs we find as supporting our diagnosis." He set the little bottle back on the table, and walked toward the door way and the living room. "We see a capsule in the sink, so we say that it is one of her digestion capsules, because I myself prescribed them, and gave the prescription to her husband to fill." He turned to look back over his shoulder. "And yet who can say that my prescription was actually filled, or that he even told her I had ordered such a prescription?" His hands clasping his lapels, Dr. Lerner stood staring at the rug. "That prescription will be downstairs in Prine's files, of course, labeled as having been filled." He looked up at Dr. Knapp. "But suppose that actually he made up only one capsule; then concealed it in a sugar cube, which could easily be done. What would happen then?"

The old doctor began to pace back and forth across the room, while Dr. Knapp watched from the kitchen doorway. "This morning she takes her insulin injection — her normal quantity, but more than double strength, so presently she will feel the first warning symptoms of shock. Now, naturally, she opens her little matchbox, pops the sugar cubes into her mouth, crunches them up and swallows quickly, as any diabetic would. Doctor, she is certain to feel that capsule as she swallows it — it's a big one. So what must she think about that? Well, her husband hated her; I knew that, and so did she. The capsule concealed in her sugar is poison! It *must* be! Why else is it there?

"Do you see?" The old man stood staring at Dr. Knapp. "It's a devilish scheme. There in Mrs. Prine's stom-

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ach is the sugar that must be there and *stay* there to save her from insulin shock. But with it is the poison she is certain will kill her! What is she to do?"

His breathing loud, his eyes bright, Dr. Lerner said, "Prine is a pharmacist, and she knows any poison he gives her will be certain to kill. So her only possible hope is that the insulin will not. After all, she doesn't know that it's double strength and more. So her only hope is to take the emetic and get that poison capsule out of her stomach. She will lose the sugar, too, and therefore the insulin shock will continue, and she knows that. But still her only chance is to hope she will survive it."

Dr. Lerner walked to the kitchen doorway and Dr. Knapp followed. The two men stood staring at the body sprawled over the table top. "Perhaps she hopes to get to more sugar after taking the emetic. But an emetic is a weakening thing, she is not a strong woman, and meanwhile the shock is building once again, growing rapidly, pounding at her senses. She manages to reach that chair. There is paper and a pencil on the table. And all she can do in the few seconds of consciousness left to her is to begin the note that tries to tell us how she was murdered. Well, Doctor? Are the arrows of our diagnosis swinging around?"

Dr. Knapp shrugged. "Well, you make out a case for it. But it's all based on the sheerest speculation. As you say yourself, it's all in the way you choose to read the signs. Do you say that capsule in the sink is actually poisoned?"

"Of course not." Dr. Lerner turned back into the living room. "That's exactly what I do not say. When it is tested, it will be found to be filled with distilled water, with my prescription in Prine's files to prove its purpose. But if she *thought* it was poisoned —"

"Sure, sure," the young man burst out angrily. "If! *If* she thought it was poisoned!" he said. "Doctor, it's all thin air, all speculation, depending entirely on what went on in a dead woman's mind! You say she thought the sugar was poisoned, but her own note contradicts you. She thought the insulin was poisoned."

Mildly, gently, Dr. Lerner said, "If she thought that, why would she take an emetic?" He paused, then continued, "Insulin is injected under the skin, Doctor. If it is poisoned, an emetic won't get rid of it; she would know that. She took that emetic because she thought there was poison in her stomach!"

Dr. Knapp shook his head. "Go read her note," he said.

"You read it, boy," Dr. Lerner said quietly. "Because you're quite right — the answer to what happened here this morning lies in a dead woman's mind. Go read what she tells us."

In the kitchen, Dr. Knapp picked up the note, and studied the wavering message — *Poisoninsu* — that trailed off, unfinished. For a long moment he

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stared at it, then he looked up, his eyes startled. "My God," he said, "you're right." He looked at the paper again. "*Poison in sugar* — that's what she was writing!"

The old man nodded. "Yes," he said quietly. "She didn't act as though she thought her insulin was poisoned. But she thought the capsule in her sugar was poison. That's how she acted, and that's what her note tells us. She was murdered by a miserable trick! And there is nothing we can do about it."

His mouth opening, Dr. Knapp looked at him incredulously.

"Well," the old man burst out bitterly, "what will you do when he denies the truth! There in that sink lies a harmless capsule, filled with distilled water! There on that table lies a note. Not even finished. Meaningless! Why, the newest, rawest, Assistant District Attorney wouldn't dream for a moment of taking this case into court."

"But, Dr. Lerner," the young man said, "that would be a *perfect crime!*"

"Well, damn it, boy, did you think they never happened?" the old man said angrily. "Were you taught that every diagnosis has its treatment?" He sighed. "I'll phone the police now."

Three hours later, finished, at last, with the police, Dr. Knapp sat outside in the car, waiting for Dr. Lerner. Then the old man appeared, got into the car, and Dr. Knapp drove to the corner, then turned into the busy street. For a block they drove in silence; then the young man said wearily, "Well, the capsule tested harmless, just as you said. And the insulin was U-100, just as you said." He shrugged. "Prine will claim it was a laboratory error, no one will believe him, and so what? Nothing can be proved. He's in the clear."

Dr. Lerner said quietly, "The Chicago police phoned back, just as I left. They found Prine, all right, in Chicago, registered at one of the large hotels. He was dead; they found him up in his room." Dr. Knapp turned to stare at him. "His heart, of course," Dr. Lerner said, "as I could have predicted. It was a virtual certainty that the natural tenseness and strain of worrying how things back here were working out would bring on an attack. Not an unusually severe one, though; nitroglycerin should have checked it. And as a matter of fact, he took his tablets — all of them. He had his little pillbox in his hand when they found him." Dr. Lerner paused. "But, and now I am quoting the Chicago medical examiner, they might as well have been candy, for all the good they did. Or, to put it another way, they might as well have been the saccharin tablets Mrs. Prine, like all diabetics, took as a sugar substitute. Some saccharin tablets look almost exactly like nitroglycerin tablets; Mrs. Prine remarked about that once, I recall. Now, if they had been substituted for Prine's nitroglycerin tablets —" Dr. Lerner shrugged. "Well, he'd have known the moment he tasted one that it was saccharin. But all he could do then

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would be to eat all of them — as he did — in the vain hope that just one of them was what it should have been."

Dr. Knapp's voice was stunned. "Double murder," he said.

"Perhaps." The old doctor smiled wanly. "If you like. But personally, I'd call it murder and self-defense. Though it's hard, I'll admit, to say which, exactly, was which." The traffic lights changed, and a horn honked behind them.

"Let's go, boy," Dr. Lerner said. "I'm retired now, and I don't want to waste a second of it."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CYRIL HARE**

TITLE: ***The 24-Carat Heel***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sergeant Place

LOCALE: Near Markhampton, England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A new short story by the author of such fine mystery novels as* AN ENGLISH MURDER *and* WHEN THE WIND BLOWS . . . *with an interesting clue — will you spot it?*

THE POLICE CAR, SUMMONED FROM County Headquarters at Markhampton, skirted the aerodrome and drove quickly on up the village street. It was half-past 8 on a fine spring morning, and the road was empty except for a string of the American army trucks that now seemed a permanent feature of the country roads in that particular part of England. Sergeant Place of the Markshire County Constabulary, sitting beside the young detective who was driving him, eyed the Americans with disfavor. He had no objection to Americans as such. By and large, they were no worse behaved than the natives. But their pattern of misbehavior was different, and to a man nurtured in routine that in itself was an offense. This job at Hawthorn Cottage, now — ten to one there was an American at the back of it, and that would mean trouble.

Hawthorn Cottage was an ancient, rather depressed little house standing isolated on the farther side of the village. It was typical of the small residences in the locality whose owners had cashed in on the American invasion by letting them furnished to visiting officers at exorbitant rates. A car containing the police surgeon drew up behind the police car as it reached the entrance, and the three men went into the house together.

It was something of a relief to Sergeant Place to find the door opened by an obvious Englishman — a sallow, middle-aged man in the discreetly tailored garb of a manservant.

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"Will you come this way, please?" he said in the accepted phrase of his profession, and led them upstairs to the best bedroom. He opened the door and stood aside for them to enter.

The man in bed had apparently been dead for some hours, for his body was already cold. He was in his middle forties, Sergeant Place judged. His features were round and indeterminate. He was dressed in expensive and rather garish silk pajamas, which looked out of place in the shabbily furnished room. On the bedside table there were a half-empty bottle of whiskey, an entirely empty glass, and a round cardboard box of the type used by chemists for dispensing pills; the cardboard box was also empty. On the floor beside the table was a letter with an envelope addressed, simply, *Mr. Edward Harris*. It had not come through the mail.

Place gave some instructions to his assistant and left the room. He found the servant standing in the corridor just outside the door.

"Let's go downstairs, shall we?" he suggested. "We can talk better there."

The man preceded him down the narrow stairway into the sitting-room. Place eyed him narrowly as he stood, deferential and nervous, in front of the empty grate.

"You haven't been here long, have you?" he began.

"I — no, sir, only three days. We were in London before that. But how —"

"Easy," said Place with a grin. "You forgot to duck your head for the beam on the landing. This place was let furnished, I suppose. To an American?"

"Not American, actually, sir. Mr. Harris is — was — English. But he had lived in the States for some years, I understood — and picked up some American habits, I may say, sir."

He was talking more easily now. Place's grin had an infectious quality about it.

"And what is your name?"

"Wilson, sir. Thomas Wilson."

"Well, Wilson, tell me: When did you find that your master was dead?"

"When I went in this morning to give him his cup of tea, sir. I didn't touch anything, but rang the police station right away. I hope I did right."

"Quite right. And when had you last seen him before that?"

"Last night, sir, about 10:30. He'd given me the evening off and he was just getting into bed when I came in."

"And what can you tell me about Mr. Harris?"

"There's very little I can tell you, sir. I had only been with him two weeks altogether. He engaged me through Chiltern's — the domestic agency. You'll have heard of them, no doubt, sir. He was a little — well, strange in his ways, I can tell you that, sir."

"Strange? Well, naturally. You've just told me that he had American habits."

"Not in that way, I don't mean, sir. He was frightened."

"What of?"

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"Oh — of people, sir. And of Americans, especially. That was why he took this house. He wanted to get away from London, he told me — there were too many Americans there."

The idea of coming to Markshire to get away from that particular danger provoked Sergeant Place to laugh outright.

"He chose the wrong spot to come to, then," he said. "Didn't he know about the air base near the village?"

"Apparently not, sir. I think it came as a great shock to him when he found out. Only yesterday, he said to me —"

That was the worst of these nervous witnesses, Place reflected. Once help them to get over their fright and they'd ramble on forever. It was time to get back to the matter in hand. He interrupted Wilson without ceremony.

"Do you know anything about this?" he said, producing the envelope which he had taken from the bedroom.

"That, sir? Oh, yes. I gave it to Mr. Harris last night when I came in."

"Where did it come from?"

"The Staff Sergeant gave it to me to give to Mr. Harris."

"I don't understand. What Staff Sergeant?"

"I was going to tell you, sir," the man said patiently. "It happened yesterday morning. Mr. Harris drove me down to the village to do some shopping. We were held up in the village street where they are doing road repairs. Only single-line traffic, you know, sir. There was an American army truck coming the other way. This Staff Sergeant was sitting beside the driver — left-hand drive, of course, sir, so he came past next to Mr. Harris. He seemed to recognize him, sir."

"How did you know that?"

"He spoke to him, sir. Just one word. It sounded like — well, like Blimey!"

"Not a very American word, Wilson. Are you sure it wasn't — Limey?"

"It could have been that, sir. What would that mean, if I might ask?"

"It's a slang word for an Englishman. Go on."

"Whatever it was, it seemed to upset Mr. Harris a lot, sir. He drove on as soon as the truck had passed, and never stopped in the village at all. We did our shopping in Markhampton. Then last night I saw the Staff Sergeant again."

"Where?"

"At the Spotted Dog, sir. I was spending my evening out there. The place was full of American soldiers, and he was with them. He recognized me at once, and spoke to me. He stood me a drink or two and then he — well, I suppose you might say he pumped me, sir."

"Found out who you were and where you were living and so on?"

"Just so, sir. Then just before closing time, he asked the barman for a bit of paper and an envelope, and wrote something and told me to give it to Mr. Harris. So I did, sir."

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"And you don't know what the letter said?"

"Naturally not, sir." There was a world of reproach in the man's civil tones. Sergeant Place acknowledged the reproof with a wry smile.

"You might be interested to know. Here it is." The Sergeant read: "*Well, Limey, this is quite a surprise. I'll be paying a visit to your hideout around noon tomorrow, so you'd better have the welcome mat out.*"

"Is that all, sir?"

"That's all. And it's signed — Joe."

"That would be the Staff Sergeant, no doubt, sir."

"Would you know him again, if you saw him?"

"These Americans all look very much alike to me, sir, but I daresay I should."

"Well, said Place, putting the letter away, "that appears to be that. You gave Harris the letter, and he is dead. Dead from — from what, exactly, Doctor?" he asked, as the police surgeon came into the room.

"One of the barbiturates, undoubtedly. I can't say more until we've had an analysis. Death took place about eight to ten hours ago, I should think. No sign of violence that I can see. If you don't want me further, I shall be going now. Shall I make arrangements to have him moved?"

"Not just yet, thank you, Doctor. I'd rather not have any coming and going here till the afternoon. Perhaps we shall have a visitor about midday."

After seeing the doctor out, Place called upstairs.

"Bert?"

"Yes, Sarge?"

"Take the car round to the back of the house, will you? Where it won't be seen from the road."

Bert came downstairs.

"I've had a good look round his room," he observed. "Lovely clothes, he's got. Yank stuff — very flash. I found this in a drawer — thought it might interest you."

He handed the Sergeant a slim bundle of press cuttings and went out to the car.

Place glanced at the papers in his hand. They were all from American newspapers and were arranged in reverse order of date. The top one of the bundle caught his eye. "*This morning Benjamin Spencer went to the electric chair for the slaying of watchman Robert Hart,*" it began. He delved a little further down, and found a familiar name. . . . "*English-born Edward Harris, onetime associate of accused Benjamin Spencer, took the stand today as State witness. . . .*"

"Will you be requiring me any more, sir?" asked the manservant.

"No," said Place, intent on his reading. "Yes," he added immediately. "What did Mr. Harris do when you gave him the note?"

"He read it, sir."

"Anything else?"

"He sent me downstairs for the whiskey and two glasses."

"*Two* glasses?"

"Mr. Harris was like that," the

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man explained. "Very free and easy. Quite the American in his ways, for all he was as English as you or I. He asked me to have a drink with him. Not at all like any other gentleman I've ever been with."

Place looked at his unhealthy face, his unsteady, tobacco-stained fingers. "You drink quite a bit, don't you, Wilson?" he said.

"A trifle, sir, I must admit — on occasion."

"Was that how you came to lose your last post?"

"No, sir!" He was all virtuous indignation. "I've been in first-class service all my life, and always had a good character. My last position was with Lord Gaveston — five years in his lordship's service, and only lost that when the household broke up after the divorce. This place was beneath me altogether. I only took it because it was all Chiltern's had to offer at the time, and the money was good. Chiltern's will answer for me, sir — they know me there, and always pleased to recommend me to the best houses. Ask them now, if you don't believe me. Belgrave 8290, the number is. You can ring them on long distance right away, if you like."

"That will do, Wilson — nothing to get excited about," said Place soothingly.

"I'm sorry, sir, but a man in my position has nothing but his character to depend on. I've had rather a shock, and — and I've had no breakfast this morning yet."

"Just finish your story, and take it quietly. You brought Mr. Harris the whiskey, you were saying . . ."

"That's right, sir. When I brought it up, he was sitting on the side of his bed. He poured out two glasses, and we each had one. Then he told me to leave the bottle and his glass with him and said good night. That's the last I saw of him till I found him this morning."

"Thank you, Wilson, you've been most helpful. Now go to the kitchen and get yourself something to eat."

Sergeant Place looked at his watch. It was just 9 o'clock. That meant three hours to wait, if Staff Sergeant Joe was punctual. And if he chose not to keep his appointment — how many Staff Sergeants, he wondered wearily, would there be at the swarming air base who answered to the name of Joe? And how long would it take him to sort them out? It could have been worse, of course. The letter might have been signed Butch or Red. To judge from the cases that passed through his hands, 50 per cent of the United States forces bore those outlandish names. But Joe was bad enough. Meanwhile, he must wait.

Waiting is part of police routine, and Place found it no great hardship. He had, for once, a comfortable chair to wait in and a bunch of press cuttings to while away the time. These he found to be the record of a very commonplace murder — the killing of a hapless employee in the course of a bank raid. And Benjamin Spencer, to judge from his photograph, had been

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a very commonplace young man — as murderers, in the Sergeant's experience, were apt to be. As for Mr. Harris, it seemed that he had been lucky to have figured in the trial only as a witness and not as an accomplice of Spencer's. Or had he been so lucky? Thinking of the man who had been frightened of Americans and was now lying in the bed upstairs, Sergeant Place was not so sure.

He read and reread, savoring with delicate contempt each item where American judicial procedure differed from the familiar perfection of the Markhampton Assize Court. Finally, some sixth sense told him to raise his head and look out of the window just as Bert called from the hall, "Here he comes, Sarge!"

Place opened the door to a thickset young man in khaki, who looked at him in surprise.

"Have I come to the right house?" he asked. "They told me this was Mr. Harris's place."

"They told you quite correctly. Come in."

Hesitantly, the visitor entered. He looked hard at Place, and then at the sergeant's subordinate.

"You're dicks, aren't you?" he said. "What's happened?"

"Did you write a letter to Mr. Harris last night?"

"I did."

"He was found dead in bed this morning."

The newcomer took a little time to digest this information. His fresh young face seemed deliberately drained of expression. To Place, watching him, there seemed something familiar in the set of the jaw.

"Well . . ." he said at last. "That kinda saves a lot of trouble, doesn't it?"

"Does it?" Place echoed. "That rather depends on what you wanted to see Mr. Harris for."

"Perhaps we don't need to go into that right now. I'm grateful to you gentlemen for giving me the news, that's all. I'd better be getting along."

"Just a minute. Before you go, there are two questions I'd like to ask you. What sort of man was the late Mr. Harris?"

"He was a heel," said the Staff Sergeant shortly. "What's the other question?"

"Is your name Spencer, by any chance?"

"Joseph Spencer, that's me."

"And Benjamin Spencer?"

"Was my brother."

"Thank you, Spencer, I think you have told me all I want to know. Now would you care to identify the body?"

"Sergeant," said Spencer with dignity, "during my residence in this country I have learned to have a great respect for your police — a very great respect. If you tell me Harris is dead, I don't ask for any ocular proof. No, sir! The word of the British police is good enough for me. All I've got to say is this: you've given me a piece of news that's going to spread joy in a lot of hearts where I come from — when it gets around, as it certainly will! So long, copper."

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"Bert, ask Wilson to come in here for a minute," said Place, after the visitor had gone.

Bert went out to the kitchen, and returned with a grin on his face.

"I think Wilson has breakfasted on whiskey," he said. "I can't get him to stir."

"Well, he's had a shock, as he said himself. Perhaps I can do without him. We'll ask the Yard to send a man round to Chiltern's. They may give us a line on the late Mr. Harris. The coroner will want to know something about him, beyond the fact that he was a heel."

He picked up the telephone.

"Get me Trunks, will you, Miss? I —"

He put the instrument down with a crash.

"Bert!" he yelled. "Get the car out, quick, and go after that Staff Sergeant. Bring him back at once — by force, if need be."

To a puzzled and rather resentful Spencer, Sergeant Place said, "I'm sorry, but I find that I shall have to ask you to identify Harris after all."

"If you say so, Sergeant. I've no objection in principle to stiffs, but —"

He broke off abruptly as Place threw open the door of the kitchen.

"Limey!" he exclaimed. He bent over the semi-conscious, stertorously breathing figure sprawled in a chair. "They said you were dead!"

"Not yet," said Place cheerfully. "But he soon will be. Our criminal procedure is rather quicker than yours, I fancy. Now, if you don't mind, we'll go upstairs and you can identify the body of Thomas Wilson — the poor innocent servant Harris poisoned last night, when he got your note. He reckoned that when you spread the news of his death he wouldn't be bothered by Benjamin Spencer's friends and relations again. It was a neat plan — and it might have come off, if he hadn't forgotten himself, and talked about *long distance* telephones — instead of Trunks. As he told me himself, he'd picked up a lot of American habits while he'd been away. I expect he came down here for the express purpose of running into you and staging this suicide. Quite a clever ruffian, Mr. Harris."

"Didn't I say he was a 24-carat heel?" said Staff Sergeant Spencer.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***Cold Money***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Ellery Queen, mystery writer, and his father, Inspector Queen

LOCALE: Hotel Chancellor, New York City

COMMENTS: *For ten years a stolen payroll of $62,000 remained stashed "they knew not where" — and then Ellery and the Inspector were faced with a baffling and frustrating clue.*

THE HOTEL CHANCELLOR IN MIDtown New York is not likely to forget the two visits of Mr. Philly Mullane. The first time Mullane registered at the Chancellor, under the name of Winston F. Parker, an alert house detective spotted him and, under the personal direction of Inspector Richard Queen, Philly was carried out of Room 913, struggling and in bracelets, to be tried, convicted, and sentenced to ten years for a Manhattan payroll robbery. The second time — ten years later — he was carried out neither struggling nor manacled, inasmuch as he was dead.

The case really began on a blacktop county road east of Route 7 in the Berkshire foothills, when Mullane sapped his pal Mikie the Waiter over the left ear and tossed him out of their getaway car, thereby increasing the split from thirds to halves. Mullane was an even better mathematician than that. Five miles farther north, he administered the same treatment to Pittsburgh Patience, which left him sole proprietor of their $62,000 haul. Mikie and Patience were picked up by Connecticut state police; the Waiter was speechless with rage, which could not be said of Patience, a lady of inspired vocabulary. Three weeks later Philly Mullane was smoked out of the Chancellor room where he had been skulking. The payroll was absent — in those three weeks the $62,000 had vanished. He had not blown the money in, for the checkback showed that he had made

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for the New York hotel immediately on ditching his confederates.

Question: Where had Mullane stashed the loot?

Everyone wanted to know. In the case of Pittsburgh Patience and Mikie the Waiter, their thirst for information had to go unsatisfied; they drew ten-year sentences, too. As for the police, for all their success in locating the stolen banknotes, they might as well have gone up the river with Mullane and his ex-associates.

They tried everything on Mullane, including a planted cell-mate. But Mullane wasn't talking, even in his sleep.

The closest they came was in the sixth year of Philly's stretch. In July of that year, in the exercise yard, Philly let out a yell that he had been stabbed, and he collapsed. The weapon which had stabbed him was the greatest killer of all, and when he regained consciousness in the infirmary the prison doctor named it for him. It was his heart.

"My pumper?" Mullane said incredulously. "Me?" And then he looked scared, and he said in a weak voice, "I want to see the Warden."

The Warden came at once; he was a kindly man who wished his rough flock well, but he had been waiting for this moment for over five years. "Yes, Mullane?" the Warden said.

"About that sixty-two grand," whispered Philly.

"Yes, Mullane?" the Warden said.

"I never been a boy scout, God knows —"

"Yes, He does," said the Warden.

"That's what I mean, Warden. I mean, I figure I can't take it with me, and maybe I can cut down on that book He's keeping on me upstairs. I guess I better tell you where I stashed that dough. The doc tells me I'm going to die —"

But the prison doctor was young and full of Truth and other ideals, and he interrupted indignantly, "I said *eventually.* Not now, Mullane! You may not get another attack for years."

"Oh?" said Philly in a remarkably strong voice. "Then what am I worried about?" And he grinned at the Warden and turned his face to the wall.

The Warden could have kicked both of them.

So everybody settled back to more waiting.

What they were waiting for was Mullane's release. They had plenty of time — the law, Patience, the Waiter, and Mullane most of all. Having behaved themselves as guests of the state, Patience and Mikie got out in something over seven years, and they went their respective ways. Mullane's silence stuck him for the limit.

The day he was released the Warden said to him, "Mullane, you'll never get away with that money. And even if you should, nobody ever gets anything out of money that doesn't belong to him."

"I figure I've earned it, Warden," said Philly Mullane with a crooked smile. "At that, it only comes to a

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measly sixty-two hundred a year."

"What about your heart?"

"Ah, that doc was from hunger."

Of course, they put a twenty-four hour tail on him. And they lost him. Two headquarters detectives were demoted because of it. When he was found ten days later he had been dead about fifteen minutes.

A long memory and a smart bit of skull work on the part of one of the Hotel Chancellor's house dicks, Blauvelt, were responsible for the quick discovery of the body. Blauvelt had been on a two-week vacation. When he returned to duty, the hotel staff was yakking about a guest named Worth who had checked in nine days before and had not left his room since. The only ones who had seen him were the room service people — he had all his meals served in his rooms — the chambermaid, and a few bellboys. They reported that he kept his door not only locked day and night, but on the chain. The room was 913, and a desk clerk recalled that Worth had insisted on that room and no other.

"I only came on the job this morning, so I haven't been able to get a look at him," Blauvelt said over the phone to police headquarters, "but from what they tell me, except for a change in the color of his hair and a couple inches in height, which could be elevators, he answers the description. Inspector, if this Worth ain't Philly Mullane hiding out I'll get me a job in the Sanitation Department."

"Nice going, Blauvelt. We'll be right over." Inspector Queen hung up and said admiringly, "Same hotel, same room. You've got to hand it to him —" But then he stopped.

"Exactly," said Ellery, who had been listening on the extension. He remembered the case as one of his father's pet bogies. "It's too smart. Unless that's where he hid the money in the first place."

"But Ellery, that room at the Chancellor was searched when we grabbed Mullane off ten years ago!"

"Not the super de luxe type search I recommend in such cases," mourned Ellery. "Remember how cleverly Mullane led you to believe he'd buried the money during his getaway? He had you digging up half the cornfields in Connecticut! Dad, it's been in that room at the Chancellor all this time."

So they went up to the Chancellor with Sergeant Velie and a couple of precinct men and Blauvelt unlocked the door of 913 with his passkey. The door was off the chain, the reason for which became immediately clear when they saw that Mullane had been murdered.

The precinct men went scurrying, and Sergeant Velie got busy on the phone.

Mullane was in a chair at the writing desk in a corner of the bedroom, his face and arms on the desk. He had been cracked on the back of the head with some heavy object which a quick examination told them was not there. From the contusion, the Inspector guessed it had been a hammer.

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"But this wound doesn't look as if the blow was hard enough to have caused death," frowned Ellery.

"Mullane's ticker went bad in prison," said his father. "Bad heart, hard blow — curtains."

Ellery looked around. The room had not yet been made up for the day and it was in some disorder. He began to amble, mumbling to himself. "Wouldn't have hidden it in a piece of furniture — they're moved around in hotels all the time. . . . In *nothing* removable. . . . Walls and ceiling tinted plaster — would mean replastering, duplicating the tint . . . too risky . . ." He got down on all fours and began crawling about.

The Inspector was at the desk. "Blauvelt. Help me sit him up."

The body was still warm and the house detective had to hold on to keep it from collapsing. Mullane's dressing-gown sleeves and collar were a mess of wet blue ink. He had been writing a note of some kind and in falling forward had upset the ink bottle.

The Inspector looked around for a towel, but there was none in the bedroom.

"Velie, get some used towels from the bathroom. Maybe we can sop up enough of this wet ink to make out what Mullane was writing!"

"No used towels in here," called the Sergeant from the bathroom.

"Then get clean ones, you dimwit!"

Velie came out with some unused towels, and Inspector Queen went to work on the note. He worked for five minutes, delicately. But all he could show for it were three shaky words: *Money hidden in* . . . The rest was blotted beyond recall.

"Why would he write where the dough was stashed?" wondered Blauvelt, continuing to embrace Mullane.

"Because after he got up this morning," snapped the Inspector, "he must have felt a heart attack coming on. When he got his attack in prison, he almost spilled to the Warden. This time it probably scared him so much he sat right down and wrote the hiding place of the money. Then he slumped forward, unconscious or dying. Killer got in — maybe thought he was dozing — finished him off, read the note before the ink soaked all the way in —"

"And found the loot," said Ellery, from under the bed. "It's gone, Dad."

So Blauvelt let Mullane go and they all got down on their faces and saw the neat hole in the floor, under the rug, with an artistically fitted removable board, where the payroll had lain for ten years. The hole was empty.

When they got to their feet, Ellery was no longer with them. He was stooping over what was left of Mullane.

"Ellery, what are you *doing?*" exclaimed Inspector Queen.

Even Sergeant Velie looked repelled. Ellery was running his palm over the dead man's cheeks with tenderness.

"Nice," he said.

"*Nice!*"

"Nice smooth shave he took this

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morning. You can still see traces of talcum powder."

Blauvelt's mouth was open.

"You want to learn something, Blauvelt?" said Sergeant Velie with a nudge that doubled the house detective up. "Now it gives a great big deduction."

"Certainly does," grinned Ellery. "It gives the killer of Philly Mullane."

The Sergeant opened his mouth.

"Shut up, Velie," said Inspector Queen. "Well?"

"Because if Mullane shaved this morning," asked Ellery, "where did he do it, Sergeant?"

"Okay, I bite," said Velie. "Where?"

"Where every man shaves, Sergeant — in the bathroom. Ever shave in the bathroom without using a towel?"

"All right, Ellery, so Mullane used a towel," said the Inspector impatiently. "So what?"

"So where is it? When you asked Velie to get one from the bathroom to sop up the ink, Dad, he said *there were no used towels in there*. And there are no towels at all in the bedroom here. What did Velie bring you from the bathroom? Some *unused* towels. In other words, after Mullane shaved this morning, *someone took the dirty towels away and replaced them with clean ones*. And this is a hotel, and Mullane, who always kept the door on the chain, had obviously let someone in . . ."

"*The chambermaid!*"

"Has to be. Mullane let the chambermaid in this morning, as usual, she got to work in the bathroom — and she never did get to the bedroom, as you can see. Why? It can only be because while she was cleaning up in the bathroom Mullane got his heart attack!

"It was the chambermaid who struck Mullane on the back of the head with the hammer she'd brought in with her — waiting for a chance to use it, as she's probably waited every morning for the last nine days.

"It was the chambermaid who read Mullane's message and scooped the money out of the hole in the floor."

"But to have come in with a hammer — she must have planned this, she must have known who he was!"

"Right, Dad. So I think you'll find, when you catch up with her, that the homicidal chambermaid is your old friend, Pittsburgh Patience, with a few alterations in her appearance. Patience suspected all along where Mullane had hidden the money, and as soon as she was out of stir three years ago she got herself a job on the Chancellor housekeeping staff . . . and waited for her old pal to show up!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **BARRY PEROWNE**

TITLE: ***A Hansom in the Night***

TYPE: Period Crime Story

CRIMINAL: Raffles

LOCALE: London

TIME: The gas-lit 1890s

COMMENTS: *A new adventure of A. J. Raffles, the amateur cracksman and chivalrous crook — and how he helped the Lady of the Lonely Hansom.*

THE MEASURED HOOFBEATS OF A trotting horse sounded in the distance. Raffles and I stopped and looked round. It was a raw, misty evening and the King's Road, Chelsea, was virtually deserted. At wide intervals the street-lamps gleamed wanly, each ringed with a nimbus.

We were in evening dress and, having already walked some way without sighting a cab, we listened hopefully to this steady clip-clop of approaching hoofs. A jingle of harness became audible, a pair of candle-lamps swam into view, a jogging horse materialized from the mist, and I glimpsed the head and shoulders of the grey-bowlered driver looming shadowy above the top of his vehicle.

"A hansom, at last," Raffles said. "Let's hope it's disengaged, Bunny."

Sure enough, at his hail, the driver reined in. Raffles gave the name of our club in Pall Mall, and we took our seats, thinking this lonely hansom no different from the hundreds of others that plied London for hire.

"A bit of luck, this," said Raffles, as the hansom turned off into the maze of side streets which lay between the King's Road and the purlieus of Knightsbridge. "I can't imagine what's happened to all the cabs tonight. Town seems dead."

He had made the same remark earlier this evening, in another connection. We had looked in for an hour at the King's Road shop of Ivor Kern, the antique dealer. Kern was the receiver through whom Raffles disposed of stolen property. Further, Kern had useful sources of criminal

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intelligence, could always recruit hirelings when required for minor roles in Raffles's plans, and even was capable now and then of making a creative suggestion.

He had failed to do so this evening. Things were very quiet. As Raffles had remarked, the town seemed dead; and we discussed its decease as the hansom, with the horse keeping up the same steady trot, turned corner after corner.

"A poor London season so far, Bunny," Raffles said. "If we're to enjoy carefree summers playing county cricket without sacrifice of our amateur status, it's essential that we make hay during the winter."

As he lighted a cigarette, the match glowed for an instant on his keen face and in his grey eyes under the slanted brim of his opera hat. He shook out the match, leaving only the pale glimmer of the candle-lamps over the horse's swaying back.

"This cabbie seems to be hugging the side streets," I remarked, presently.

"We're just coming into Lowndes Square, I think," Raffles said.

The same steady trot took us across the square and round to the right, up towards Hyde Park Corner. There were more lights here, and Raffles leaned forward suddenly. "What's going on ahead there?"

A small crowd was gathered on the pavement before St. George's Hospital to our right, another before the entrance to Hyde Park to our left. The faces in the mist seemed to be turned all one way, watching the dim lamps of a long line of stationary carriages over on the Green Park side.

"Of course!" Raffles exclaimed. He pushed up the trap above our heads. "Stop a minute, driver."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I should have remembered," Raffles said. "The Queen's holding her first Court of the season tonight." Impatiently, he pushed up the trap again. "What the devil's the matter with you, driver? I asked you to pull up."

The horse trotted on a little further before the driver slowed it to a walk, reined in to the left, and brought us jingling to a standstill at a point clear of street-lamps or sightseers. We peered across lower Piccadilly.

It was only the tail-end of the Palace carriage line that was visible, drawn up at the kerbside under tree branches overhanging the ornate railings of Green Park. Following the rounded corner of the park, the carriage line looped to the left under the grey stone arch to Constitution Hill and was no doubt continuous all along it, looping finally to the right again to enter the Palace gates.

"A giant capital S," Raffles murmured, "comprising carriages, coachmen, footmen — and debutantes with their chaperons. The flower of England's beauty, Bunny — to say nothing of her finest jewellery, the priceless heirlooms of her noblest families.

A nuance of the speculative in his tone sent an uneasy feeling through me.

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"Don't overlook," I said sharply, "the inevitable presence in large numbers of the finest flower of the Metropolitan Police — uniformed and in clothes treacherously plain."

He seemed not to hear me. He was leaning forward, intent, in the stationary hansom. A stir went through the carriage line. Harnesses jingled, hoofs clopped, and, with lamps reflecting from sleek black panels and coachmen's cockaded hats, the carriages rolled forward a few yards, only to be halted again.

Under the bare, overhanging boughs a misty street-lamp here and there dimly illumined the interior of a carriage, hinting at perfumed beauty, the opulence of silk and satin, ostrich plume and ermine. In one carriage gleamed the sparkle of a tiara, from the window of another appeared a slim arm in a long, white glove to signal to the coachman, and gems flashed at the lady's wrist. Two uniformed constables walked past with measured gait.

I nudged Raffles. "Let's go," I said. "We're merely wasting time." I pushed up the trap. "Carry on, driver."

Reins slapped the top of the hansom, the horse set off again. Raffles leaned back in his seat. The glow of his cigarette brightened and dimmed.

"Interesting sight," he said, after a while. "Let's see, when is the next Court, Bunny?"

"In about ten days," I said uneasily. "What of it?"

"Nothing, old boy."

The hansom bowled down St. James's Street, turned left into Pall Mall, and would have gone on past the club's entrance had I not raised the trap to stop the driver. Even as it was, as we stepped to the kerb and Raffles fished a handful of gold and silver from his pocket to hand up a coin to the driver, I noted with disapproval that we had overrun the club's steps by a good twenty yards, and I turned to Raffles to point out this instance of poor driving.

Raffles was looking after the departing hansom. He shook his head slowly, and his tone was odd as he said, "Not poor driving, I fancy. Design, rather. Didn't you notice? Back streets employed wherever possible, lighted spots avoided, and no word spoken."

"What are you hinting at?" I demanded.

"That the driver didn't want to be seen," he said. "Or heard. Especially, not by a bobbie. The reason? A matter of a hackney-driver's license, I imagine. That driver was a woman."

"A *woman?*" Incredulous, I peered after the hansom.

I was just in time to glimpse the trim shoulders and neat grey bowler of the driver, shadowy on the box, as the lonely hansom dissolved into the mist, and the clip-clop of the trotting hoofs faded along Pall Mall.

Raffles had not seen her face. The night was too dark for that. He had known she was a woman from the touch of her gloved hand as he paid her. He was intrigued. I pointed out that the touch of a hand in the dark

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was little to go on, and that, even had he not been mistaken, the incident was unimportant and its explanation might well prove commonplace.

Nevertheless, knowing him as I did, I had a feeling I should hear more of the matter. Sure enough, five days later, at an impossibly early hour, the jangling doorbell of my small flat in Mount Street — Raffles himself had chambers in the Albany, not far off — brought me blearily from my bed to find an urchin at the door.

"Mr. Manders?" he piped. "Note for you, guv."

It was from Raffles. It suggested that I bestir myself for once, and ride in the Row that morning, adding, "Excellent mounts are always available at the Dale Livery Stables, Knightsbridge."

The cryptic communication whetted my curiosity. By 8 o'clock, dressed for riding, I was in a cab threading the narrow streets behind Tattersall's. The cab decanted me at the entrance to a mews. A stone arch over the entrance bore the legend: Dale Livery & Riding Stables — Public & Private Hire — Hacks, Hunters, etc. Walter Dale, Prop.

Flicking my riding-boots with my crop, I walked in under the arch. Early sunshine, glinting on slate roofs, filled the mews enclosure with brightness. There was a hissing of hostlers and the sloshing of water as they worked on carriages standing with upflung shafts. I noticed a neat brougham that bore a discreet crest on its door-panel. And a premonitory excitement kindled in me as I spotted, tucked away in a line in one corner, tilted down on their shafts, three humble hansoms.

I had a presentiment as to why Raffles had sent me here.

So far, as I stood in the sunshine just inside the entrance, nobody had paid me the slightest attention. But now a voice calling, "Nell! Oh, Nell!" caused me to look up. Over wide-open stable doors to the right was a small window under the eaves. On the narrow sill, pots of crocuses flowered white, purple, yellow. There was a man at the window. He appeared to be overseeing the activity in the yard from a propped-up position in bed. His hair was grey. He had a fine-drawn face of unusual distinction but as white as the pillows at his back. He beckoned to someone from the window, and his hand in the sunshine looked almost transparent.

"Oh, Nell!" he called again.

This time, above the clatter of buckets and rattle of spoke-brushes, he was heard, and a girl came into view from behind the brougham with the crested door-panel.

"Yes, father?" she said. She was slender in a skirt of fawn covert and a white blouse, and had a chamois-leather in her hand. The sunshine touched her hair to a warm amber as she looked up at the window where the crocuses bloomed. "What is it, dear?" she said.

The hand at the window motioned toward me, and at once, with a smile, the girl came forward.

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"I beg your pardon," she said. "I didn't see you, sir. Can I be of any assistance?"

I stared at her, conscious of a measured throb in my chest, sure now why Raffles had sent me here. It was because he had found her and, for some reason of his own, wished me to see her. This, surely, was the lady of the lonely hansom — this girl fresh as the morning, clean-cut, with a clear tan and clear eyes of a dark grey, and a manner composed and pleasant.

I felt a warmth in my cheeks as I stammered, "I thought — I understand I can get a horse here for an hour or so without prior booking?"

"Certainly, sir." She consulted a tiny watch from her waistband. She was crisp and businesslike. She was a darling of a girl. "Magog is in, and fresh," she said. "I can have him ready for you in just a minute."

I gazed after her as she walked across to the stable doorway under the sill of crocuses, and I wondered if this morning girl could really have been the same one who had been driving the hansom in the night mist and solitude of the King's Road. Yet I felt sure it must be so.

"Herbert," I heard her call into the stable, "what's the new man on?"

"Bosworth, 'm?" replied a voice. "'E's muckin' aht, 'm."

"Tell him to leave it," said the girl, "and get Magog saddled." She glanced up at the window. "You all right, father?"

"Splendid, my dear — enjoying the sunshine," said the man in the bed. "I was wondering, though — oughtn't John to be back? He'll have to do that eight-thirty job, I'm afraid."

"John'll be back," said the girl confidently. "By the way, father, he took a look at that spring on Lady Mendawe's brougham and he says it'll be perfectly all right for Thursday next."

"Lady Mendawe," said the man at the window, in a curiously dry tone, "will no doubt be gratified to hear it."

It seemed to me that some fleeting confidence passed in the glance between father and daughter, that there was a subtle and strange inflection in their tone as they used the name of Lady Mendawe.

The girl returned to her work with the chamois. Putting my crop under my arm, I took out my cigarette-case. I had feeling, exciting yet in a sense irrational, that here in this Knightsbridge mews I was standing at the vortex of some quickening human drama. Two words nagged at my mind: *Thursday next* —

I lighted a cigarette. And suddenly, as I stood there smoking, those two words blazed with meaning for me, my pulses leaped, and I looked with new, sharp interest at the brougham with the crested door-panel. *Thursday night was the night of the second Court.*

At that moment, hoofs plodded ringing on the stable cobbles, and a great sixteen-hand chestnut, saddled, with dangling stirrups, was led out into the sunshine by a corduroy-

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capped hostler in breeches, wrinkled leggings, and braces worn over a ragged red guernsey. The girl returned to inspect the horse for my comfort.

"This is Magog, sir," she told me. Expertly, she checked curb and martingale. "He's a bit of a stargazer," she explained. She had me test a stirrup-leather under my armpit for length, and ordered the hostler to tighten the girth. "Much too loose again, Bosworth," she said.

"Yes, 'm," the fellow rejoined respectfully.

Wheels rumbled in through the arched entrance. The girl glanced that way, and I saw her eyes light up with more than ordinary pleasure.

"Excuse me," she said hastily.

I looked after her as she hurried to meet a four-wheeler that had pulled into the mews. The driver, stepping down, was a tall, lithe, powerful chap with a rather battered face and a smile that, as he touched his bowler to the girl, was singularly pleasant.

"Oh, John," she said, "I'm terribly sorry — you've had no breakfast yet, but I'm afraid there's a job come in for 8:30 —"

He was cheerful. It was easy to see that he would have done anything for her. "Don't worry, Miss Nell. Leave it to me."

I recognized the man, had seen his battered face and good grin in the smoke-hazed ring of the National Sporting Club. He fought as an amateur. He was John Gilby, whom the jehus of London called The Fighting Cabman.

My interest by now intense, I turned to my horse. I took the bridle from the hostler, put my foot in the stirrup he held for me. And he spoke in a mutter.

"Kern's place, Bunny," said the hostler, "7 o'clock tonight."

Dumfounded, I looked into the grey eyes of A. J. Raffles. My face flamed. Impassive, he stepped back, smoothing his grimy hands down his guernsey. I swung into the saddle, clapped heels to Magog, and posted out under the arch.

I did not see him when I returned the horse to the stables. I had a thing or two to say to him about the surprise he had sprung on me; he was all too prone to that kind of antic. And I had not altogether got over my irritation as I sat drinking sherry with Ivor Kern that evening in his cluttered, gaslit sitting-room over the antique shop in the King's Road. The receiver was a thin, tall, black-clad, young-old man with a pale, hollow-cheeked face, a lofty forehead, and dark eyes full of a cynical intelligence.

I glanced at him with raised brows as footsteps sounded through the dark, shuttered shop below us. He nodded.

"Bosworth," he said, with his dry chuckle. "The hostler. He'll join us as soon as he's taken a bath."

Presently the door opened and Raffles walked in, debonair in evening dress, his dark, crisp hair still damp.

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He tossed his cape and opera hat onto a chair, rubbed his hands with zest.

"Ah! Sherry!" he said. "This hostling gives one a thirst. Sorry if you got a bit of a jolt this morning, Bunny, but I wanted you to see the state of affairs." He raised his glass. "I give you Miss Ellen Dale, gentlemen — the lady of the lonely hansom."

"So she *is* the one," I said. "How did you find her out?"

"By prowling round stables in the guise of an out-of-work hostler," Raffles said; "particularly stables in the side streets between King's Road here and Knightsbridge, since on the night she drove us she seemed very familiar with that area. At the fourth stables I visited, I found Miss Ellen Dale. 'Here's milady,' I thought, 'as sure as fate.' I promptly asked her for a job, and I was in luck. They're short-handed — for a reason you'll understand in a minute — and she turned me to right away. Mucking out," he added wrily. He glanced at Kern as he drew up a chair to the table at which we were sitting. "By the way, Ivor, what luck with the arrangements I asked for?"

The receiver held up four fingers.

"Four?" said Raffles. "Excellent!" He lighted a cigarette. "I may as well tell you, Bunny, that in looking for the lady of the hansom I was looking also for certain other stable information." He dropped the match into an ashtray. "Information," he said suavely, "as to carriage arrangements for debutantes to be presented at Court. I learned much of interest. As, for instance, just who has carriages and coachmen standing by at what livery stables in the Knightsbridge area for next Thursday night."

I was tense. The gas-globe sang faintly above our heads, shedding down on us a white, naked light. I moistened my lips.

"Lady Mendawe, for one?" I said.

"Yes," he said, "Lady Mendawe — a notorious old battle-axe and conniver. She's kept her brougham at Walter Dale's stables for years, but has no private coachman. She uses Dale's drivers — for preference, an old chap called Herbert Light. Now, then, here's the remarkable situation, Bunny, which I learned as a result of a night ride in a stray hansom picked up in the King's Road: The debutante whom Lady Mendawe is chaperoning this season, and whom she's to present at Court next Thursday night, is the niece of the proprietor of the livery stables where Lady Mendawe has kept her brougham for years. The debutante is Nell Dale's cousin."

There came back to me a memory of the peculiar tone in which the girl at the mews and her father had spoken of Lady Mendawe, her brougham, and next Thursday night.

"A queer contrast between two girls," Raffles said. "They've never met in their lives. The story, as I've pieced it together from hints here and there and a bit of shameless eavesdropping on Nell and her father, is an ironic one. Walter Dale's the younger son of a County family,

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titled and landed gentry of very large estate. He and his elder brother were in love with the same girl. It was Walter who got her. His brother, a mean dog by the sound of him, never forgot or forgave, and when he came into the title and estates he hit back at Walter by cutting off his allowance. Walter was in the army — cavalry. With a wife and child — Nell — to support, he couldn't afford to continue in his commission, had to send in his papers. He had a hardish time. He knew nothing but horses. He got employment as a riding-master, and was working at that when his wife died. He carried on, and then the man he was working for offered him a chance to take over the stable. Dale borrowed right and left to do it. He thought his luck had changed, but it hadn't. He got kicked by a horse, and he's been on his back ever since. The interest on his loans is high. He's a hair's breadth from bankruptcy. It's touch and go each week whether he can even pay his drivers and hostlers, though they're utterly loyal to him and to Nell — especially John Gilby."

Raffles reached for the sherry.

"That," he said, "is why the stable's short-handed. And it's why sometimes, on busy nights, without her father's knowledge, Miss Nell — though she has no license to drive a hackney — will take out a hansom herself in unfrequented areas, rather than have it standing idle and badly needed shillings going to waste. Hence our ride that night — the luckiest night of that girl's life."

"How do you mean?" I said.

"Listen," said Raffles. "The brother's daughter, the heiress — a spoiled little brat from all I hear — is in London for her 'coming out.' When she's presented Thursday next, she'll be wearing valuable jewellery to which she has no moral right. It belonged to her grandmother, and it seems the old lady intended that her younger son, Walter, should get at least something, if only her personal jewellery. But apparently the brother took advantage of some ambiguity in the will and, along with all the rest, he copped even those gems. Today, Bunny, the cash value of those sparklers would make all the difference between life and death for Walter Dale. You see the irony? The brother takes his title from the estate. Lady Mendawe has no idea that there's any connection between the people at the livery stable where she's kept her brougham for years and the debutante she's presenting this season. But you can see what a galling coincidence it must seem, from the Dales' viewpoint, that it happens to be their customer, Lady Mendawe, who's chaperoning that particular debutante. A galling coincidence! Yet at the same time," said Raffles, "what an opportunity!"

"I don't follow you," I said.

"No?" said Raffles. "Look, Nell knows very well her father wouldn't survive the ordeal of a bankruptcy in his present state of health. It would finish him. She's a girl with her wits about her. She must have considered

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the possibility of putting John Gilby, who loves her and would stop at nothing short of murder for her, on the box of that brougham on Thursday night with instructions to drive into a back street and relieve the debutante of that jewellery."

"Never!" I shouted. "A girl like Miss Dale would never connive at such an act!"

"Not even to save her father's life?" Raffles said. "She seems to have impressed you, Bunny, yet you underestimate her. However, you're right, she wouldn't do it, and I'll tell you why. She's in love with John Gilby. She wouldn't impose a risk on him that might make him a fugitive for life. By the same token, and with an invalid father to care for, she couldn't — despite her hansom-driving exploits — take the risk herself. But a hostler, now," said Raffles softly, "a stray man taken on only a few days ago — Hey?"

This gaslit room over the shuttered, dark antique shop seemed to me to have become uncommonly hot. I touched my handkerchief to my forehead. My voice sounded hoarse to me. "As I understand it, this fellow Herbert Light is already detailed to drive the brougham —"

Raffles nodded. "All the drivers are booked solid for the night of the Court. But there's a thing about Herbert. He always keeps a quart bottle of stout in a corner of the loose-box. I think it may very well turn out that Herbert is taken inexplicably ill on Thursday evening. In which case, who will be left to take his place?"

Ivor Kern gave his sudden dry chuckle.

"Just so," said Raffles. "Bosworth! And incidentally, Ivor, we'll be needing a loan of your own brougham on Thursday night."

"Who'll be driving that?" said the receiver.

Raffles glanced at me as he dipped his cigarette to the flame in his cupped hands.

"Bunny," he said.

So it was that the evening of the following Thursday, night of the second Court, found me on the box of a private brougham, arriving by devious side streets at a rendezvous at almost the exact centre of a triangle of which the base was Exhibition Road, the left side Hyde Park, the right side Brompton Road, the apex Tattersall's.

It was just such a night, raw and misty, as that on which we had hailed the lonely hansom which had involved us in this adventure. Huddled in a greatcoat buttoned to the throat, my grey bowler jammed low over my eyes, my knees berugged, I yet had a sense of exposure on the unaccustomed elevation of the box. The ribbons were supple and slippery in my gloved yet icy hands. The horse's broad back jogged indefatigably below me in the pallid light of the candle-lamps.

The narrow street I was traversing opened at its end into a somewhat wider space. The wheels rumbled on

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cobbles. I slowed the horse to a walk. On my left was a high, glass-topped wall that enclosed the backyard of a great mansion. On my right was a much lower wall, scarcely hub-high, overhung by the branches of trees growing in an ancient, long-disused graveyard. I caught a glimpse, as I brought the horse to a standstill close in under the branches, of mossed tombstones swimming in the mist. These vanished as I leaned from the box and blew out the lamps. The only light left was the misty sheen of a gaslamp high up in an arch of crumbling stone about thirty yards ahead. Beyond it, in that direction, the mews that housed the Dale Livery Stables lay at no great distance.

Scarcely had I doused the lamps than I heard hoofbeats approaching. A neat brougham passed in under the arch, came on towards me, and was reined in as it drew level. The coachman was a shadow in greatcoat and silk hat as he leaned over from his box.

"Bunny?" he said. "Good man! It's gone like clockwork so far. The stuff in Herbert's stout worked and I was put on the job at once. I'm on my way to Lady Mendawe's house, top end of Queen's Gate, to pick up my passengers. If she spots I'm taking side streets and leans out to ask why, I shall tell her the road's up in front of Knightsbridge Barracks, so I'm swinging over to the Brompton Road. I shall be back this way in twenty minutes to half an hour. Keep warm!"

It was a dark, lonely vigil I kept under the trees after the sound of his horse had faded into silence. A mist-nimbus glimmered about the gaslamp under the arch. I thought of the long, S-shaped carriage line which now would be forming along Constitution Hill and lower Piccadilly. I stamped my feet. I was growing cramped. I reflected on my own humble role, which was merely to provide Raffles with the means of a rapid departure from this scene of his projected robbery. I should be glad when it was all over. A sense of the proximity of those tilted, decaying old tombstones bothered me. I peered down uneasily into the darkness there — and the sudden clink of a stone made my flesh creep. In the same instant a shadow blacker than the night rose up from the graveyard, seemed to pour over the low wall right alongside the brougham, and I heard the hammer-click of a revolver cocked, and a low, hard, intense voice.

"All right," it said. "Down from that box! Quick, cully!" The rug was snatched from my knees. An iron hand gripped my arm, jerked me down from the box, spun me round to face the brougham. The revolver prodded my spine. The hand slapped my hips and sides. "Right," the voice said. "Put your hands behind you." I felt the noose of a twisted handkerchief slipped over my wrists and the knot jerked tight. "Now, get in there," the voice said.

A hand reached past me, yanked open the door of the brougham. I was shoved in sprawling on the roughness of the coir mat between the seats. I

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felt my ankles clasped together and tied, then my head was jerked back by fingers clutching my hair, and what tasted like a huge knot in a thick woollen scarf was rammed into my mouth, and the scarf was knotted tight at the back of my head.

"That'll do you, cock," the voice said. "Now, lie doggo and hear the fun!"

The door shut behind me. I felt the brougham tilt on its springs as the marauder climbed to my place on the box. I lay still, my heart pounding against the floor, the matting scratchy against my cheek, the breath whistling in my nose.

After a while I began testing my bonds. They were immovably tight. Careful to make no sound, I worked myself to my knees and contrived to ease into a sitting position on the seat facing forward. I had barely done so than I heard the sound of hoofs approaching at a trot. This would be the Mendawe brougham with Raffles on the box. My only thought was somehow to warn him that the man in my place on the box of this stationary brougham was an interloper.

The window to my left was lowered about halfway on its strap. I tried to heave myself up so that I could stick my head out of the window and be seen by Raffles. But I was too late. The Mendawe brougham, with glimmering lamps, was coming alongside, reining in with a clatter of hoofs and a jingle of harness. There was a space of only a few yards between the broughams, the Mendawe brougham being about a half length in advance. I caught a glimpse of the conventional Court ostrich feathers as a woman's head was thrust from the window, looking up at the coachman's box. I leaned back into the dark corner of the seat. It was too late, now. The man in my place on the box was almost certainly a plainclothesman. Somehow, we had been betrayed and a trap set. Raffles would be taken red-handed. I heard the woman's voice, shrill, peremptory, arrogant.

"What is it now, you miserable fellow? Why have we stopped? What is that other carriage under the trees there? Do you hear me? Answer me at once!"

Peering obliquely from the window, my eyes starting, I saw the gleam of Raffles's silk hat as he stepped down from the box. I saw for an instant the black mask he had donned. Then his back was turned to me. He was opening the door of the other brougham. I heard his voice, courteous and cool.

"Since you ask, Lady Mendawe," he said, "the other carriage is mine. The coachman waiting on the box is my confederate. I'm afraid you need look for no help from him. Yet you need have not the slightest fear so long as you do as I tell you. Now, I must trouble you to step out. And the young lady with you."

Had they defied him, he would merely have applauded their resolution and given them best. What else could he have done? He would no more have dreamed of striking a

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woman than of carrying a deadly weapon. But he understood moral effect and used it with cunning. Hence the black mask, hence the place chosen — the discouraging proximity of the graveyard.

A rustling sounded. The women were descending. I glimpsed in the space between the two broughams a rich shimmer of satin capes, a gleam of furs, a sparkle of precious stones.

"You can perhaps," said Raffles pleasantly, "anticipate the next step? Just so. Your jewels. Thank you. Charming. See, I place them in this silk handkerchief. No, please — not your rings. So often rings have a sentimental value. I make it a rule never to touch rings. For the rest, knowing our good Queen as we do, we can feel sure she'll think only the more warmly of a young lady who makes her first curtsey before her in unembellished natural beauty. Why paint the lily? But you'll be anxious, now, not to arrive late at the Palace. Don't worry. You see the arch ahead with the lamp in it — a little dim in the mist? Just before you reach it, there is a paved footpath to the right, under the trees. If you follow it, in three minutes you'll be in Brompton Road, where it'll be easy to pick up a cab. Good night, ladies."

"One thing, sir," said Lady Mendawe. Her voice shook with rage. "Let me tell you that I am a woman of influence. I will bring unremitting pressure to bear upon Scotland Yard until detectives hound you down and gaol you till you rot, you blackguard!"

The angry tap of heels receded over the cobbles. I was stupefied by the failure of the man in my place on the box to intervene. Even now he made no move. The only sound was a jingle of harness as the Mendawe horse tossed its head. In the glimmer of the candle-lamps I could see Raffles standing watching the women safely out of sight. I made a fresh struggle to heave myself up and thrust my head from the window.

But just then Raffles turned round, removing his mask. I saw his smile as he glanced up at the box. Then the springs of the brougham gave a sudden great heave, and he was blotted out, going down under a hurtling, dark shape as the interloper launched himself from the box. I heard the sounds of a brief struggle, a gasp of triumph, then the clatter of running feet, swiftly receding.

I listened intently. The door of the brougham opened. I saw Raffles's silhouette, felt his hands groping over me. He found the scarf that gagged me, and I heard his quiet chuckle.

"Bad business, Bunny," he said. "We've been robbed!"

I spat shreds of wool from my mouth, gasping, "Who was he?"

"If you'd just been punched by him," Raffles said, as he freed my ankles, "you wouldn't need to ask. John Gilby, of course. The Fighting Cabman!"

He helped me out of the brougham, handed me my fallen bowler. At that moment, from nearby in the Brompton Road, there sounded through the

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misty night the urgent, repeated shrilling of a police whistle. We exchanged a single glance, then leaped to the box of the brougham. Raffles took the ribbons. He chuck-chucked the horse around in a complete turn, and we went off at a fast trot, leaving Lady Mendawe's brougham standing abandoned with open doors and glimmering lamps.

When that terrible shrilling of the whistle had faded far behind us, Raffles reined in for a moment to light our own lamps, then we went on through the maze of side streets toward the King's Road. I sensed that some anxiety was gnawing at him, but had an impression that it had nothing to do with what had happened, but was concerned with something that lay before us.

Of what had already happened he made light.

"You understand, of course, Bunny," he said, "that the problem was less one of how to *get* the jewels than of how to give them to Miss Nell. I, a stranger, couldn't just *hand* them to her. She'd have feared some trap, some joker. Had I sent them to her as from 'An Anonymous Friend,' she'd have been afraid to keep them for fear of subsequent blackmail. To have confided in John Gilby would have come to the same thing. People are suspicious of quixoticism. They don't understand it. John, too, would have been fearful of a joker in it somewhere. No, the only way to do it was to give John an opportunity to get them by, as he imagined, outwitting a crook who actually had stolen them and whose trail the police would follow. That way, John will feel safe. And since the jewels will come to Nell from her beloved John's hand, she'll feel safe, too. You see?"

My brain whirled. "You *knew* I was trussed up in that brougham, that the man on the box was not me?"

Raffles chuckled. "Of course! As Bosworth, the hostler, I've been behaving suspiciously for days, to get them wondering what I was up to. When Herbert went sick tonight, they thought they'd guessed my game. John and Nell then made their own plan. They let me drive the Mendawe brougham. John followed me on foot. He saw my rendezvous with you. He spotted, as he thought, our whole plan. So he jumped on you and set his little ambush."

"But why didn't you tell me?"

"Bunny," he said, "it would have been agony for you, sitting on that box, knowing you were going to be jumped on at any second, not knowing from where. Far better that you should be in ignorance. You've been of vital importance all the way through. Your visit to the mews to ride Magog was the means of arousing the initial suspicion of me. Your face, when Bosworth the hostler whispered to you, would have aroused suspicion in an archangel."

I felt a stab of chagrin. "But who was there to see me?" I said. "John Gilby had just driven in, but he and Nell had eyes only for each other."

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"Have you forgotten," said Raffles, "the invalid at the window?"

It was true. I had forgotten him. My chagrin deepened. But when we had returned Kern's brougham to his private stableyard, and were turning in at the dark doorway of the antique shop, a new and startling thought occurred to me. I gripped Raffles's arm as he was putting his key in the lock.

"The girl will never dare to keep those jewels," I exclaimed, "even though morally they belong to her father. Don't you realize, Raffles, that the police will soon ferret out the relationship between the people at the livery stables where Lady Mendawe's brougham was kept and the debutante who was robbed? The police'll put two and two together. The finger points straight at the Dales. The police will discount the vanished hostler, Bosworth, as a mere confederate or red herring. When Nell and John get time to think things over, they'll realize the hopelessness of their position and hand over the jewels with some concocted story about recovering them from Bosworth."

Raffles was unperturbed. "I think not," he said. "If all is as I hope."

We passed through the dark shop, mounted the stairs, and opened the door of Ivor Kern's sitting-room. The receiver was sitting alone at the table. He turned his pale face and high forehead towards us and, with his cynical smile, held up four fingers.

"Excellent," said Raffles, "excellent!" He peeled off his coachman's greatcoat. "Sherry, Ivor," he said. "Or, better still, Scotch. We need something for our nerves. What about a hand of cards?"

I was mystified, and in no mood whatever to play cards, but I had no choice save to participate. Every now and then, as we played, I saw Raffles lift his head, as though listening. And suddenly, from far off along the King's Road, sounded the thin cry of a newsboy.

"Listen!" said Raffles.

Swiftly, along the misty street where the wide-spaced lamps gleamed wanly, each with its nimbus, the cry of the running boy sped closer. The hoarse shout sounded, now, under the window:

"Extry! Extry! 'Olesale robbery Court debertahnts! Great sensayshun! Extry! Extry!"

My blood ran cold. I sprang to my feet.

Raffles leaned back in his chair, taking a Sullivan from his cigarette-case. There was a queer smile on his lips as he looked up at me.

"Forgive the melodrama, Bunny," he said. "I really *had* to see your expression. It's my most valued reward." He set the cigarette between his lips. "You see, old fellow," he said, "the Dales' relationship to a robbed debutante becomes — as Miss Nell and John will be quick to realize — a mere coincidence, in no sense specifically incriminating, provided the robbery of that debutante *is only one of a series of similar robberies carried out simultaneously as a large-scale operation!* Accordingly, I made ar-

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rangements with Ivor here, who was able to place four skilful criminals of his acquaintance in four different livery stables. With minor variations, but with strict instructions to accord the selected debutantes and their chaperons every courtesy, they were able to work similar coups — on a percentage basis with Ivor and ourselves — to the coup we ourselves brought off on Lady Mendawe and her debutante."

He dipped his cigarette to the flame in his cupped hands.

"I think we're now well on the way," he said, "to ensuring a carefree summer's cricket. All right, Ivor, now that Bunny's fully informed, let's have a look at our share of the loot delivered by your hirelings."

The receiver took a red silk handkerchief from his pocket. He spread the handkerchief open on the table and under the white shine of the gas-globe over our heads a pile of jewelled adornments shot forth a faceted, dazzling radiance.

I sank back slowly into my chair.

The cry of the newsboy had faded in the distance. There was no sound but the faint hiss of the gaslight and the leisured clip-clop of a horse's hoofs passing by peacefully along the King's Road.

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Author's Solution To

MERLINI AND THE VANISHED DIAMONDS

SYNOPSIS: Customs agents have followed a suspected smuggler and the half-million dollars' worth of diamonds he was carrying across the Atlantic. But when his boat docked the diamonds had vanished. He was searched as only Customs Agents can do it — his cabin examined minutely, his luggage X-rayed, etc. And throughout the search the highly amused suspect, a French magician known as Aldo the Enigma, calmly continued to practice gambling sleights, dealing himself one winning Poker hand after another from a shuffled deck.

Customs head George Hurley figured the way to catch one magician was with another — The Great Merlini. After watching another thorough search of Aldo, Merlini offered to outdo Aldo in a trick. He predicted that he could get a perfect Bridge hand even though the French magician dealt the cards. Hurley who had seen too many tricks by now growled, "You can play games with this character in his cell! I want to know where this hiding place is you say we missed — and right now!"

SOLUTION: "Pierre," Merlini said of the French magician, "is much too uninterested in the impossible trick I offered to do; any other magician or gambler would have demanded to see it at once. And why does a card man of his calibre claim to know so little about Bridge? Most important, why is he so reluctant to finish dealing out four full hands of Bridge?"

"What's so different about Bridge?" the glum Customs Agent asked. "He's been dealing fancy Poker hands."

"Yes. Five hands of five cards each. That's less than half the deck. I want to see him deal *the rest of the deck!*"

"The rest of it?" Hurley said. "But . . . but he's been shuffling that deck all morning." The Customs chief reached for the deck and an unsmiling Aldo shrugged and let it go.

"He's been doing card tricks all the time" Merlini went on, "because he didn't want to let the deck out of his hands. The shuffling was the misdirection that made you decide, without really thinking about it, that the deck must be innocent. And yet every trick he did cried out that his shuffle couldn't possibly be legitimate."

When Hurley tried to spread the cards across the floor half of them stuck solidly together. He picked the solid half of the deck up, inserted a fingernail under the top card, and pulled. It peeled off reluctantly.

"Glued together," Gavigan said, "and hollowed out!"

The tightly-packed gems that filled the hole in the half-deck blazed brilliantly in the light.

"A perfect hand," Merlini smiled, "in diamonds!"

— CLAYTON RAWSON

(*For names of winners see page 36*)

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Clayton Fox's "The Heel of Achilles O'Shay" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Tenth Annual Contest. It is a sentimental tale that carries with it an air of nostalgia — homesickness for those "good old days" of, say, Thubway Tham and Philo Gubb. . . . The author is in his middle thirties and at the time he submitted his story was in the employ of the Boeing Airplane Company. He was born in California, grew up on a ranch in Idaho, and entered the CCC directly from high school, working as a stonemason and a quarrier. After that, a most interesting gamut of occupations, including miner, ranch hand, and lumberjack — what stories Mr. Fox can tell out of his own experiences! In 1940 he enlisted in the Navy, served six years as a pharmacist's mate, and was in Pearl Harbor when the infamy started and off Tokyo when the war ended.

After the war Mr. Fox worked for the government a while, as a medical technician, and then took on the most curious job of his multivocational career — he became an autopsy assistant to a one-armed pathologist! Is it any wonder that, on entering the University of Washington in 1947, he decided to major in writing?

And now, for reasons inherent in Mr. Fox's first story, we wish you all a Very Merry Christmas . . .

THE HEEL OF ACHILLES O'SHAY

by CLAYTON FOX

"THE YULETIDE SEASON IS UPON US again," the Professor informed his cellmate, Willie the Squeak. "A time to think of old friends, to warm our hands before the fire of memory. There are those who, in passing this cold mass of stone, would shed a tear for the souls detained here at Christmastime. But think of them — hurrying and jostling, spending themselves poor for cravats too bright and shirts too large and négligées too thin, with an old friend only a fleeting memory as they scrawl a short message on a Christmas card. 'I'll write a letter later,' they always say — but they never do; and another Christmas comes and goes, with old friends fading into the eternal mists." The Professor talked that way — "real

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fancy lingo," according to Willie the Squeak.

"Here in this cold pile," the Professor went on, "we can conjure up our old friends from the storehouse of memory and turn their personalities to the light, examining the prismatic glow of each facet."

"You must be saying something, Professor, but it ain't coming through," Willie muttered.

"No doubt," the Professor said. "I was thinking of the man who occupied this — ah — room with me last year. Achilles O'Shay. A great man, Achilles, and yet he had his hubris."

"His what?" Willie squeaked.

"His hubris. In Greek tragedy, Willie, the noble character had his fatal flaw — the hubris. Originally it was pride, but later the term came to mean any weakness, any chink in the armor of the soul."

"No kidding," Willie said. He turned up the volume control on the speaker system. "Johnny Ray!" he wailed. "If I ever get my hands on the trusty who puts the platters on — Go ahead, Professor."

As I was saying (the Professor continued), Achilles O'Shay had all the attributes of a great character, and he had his fatal flaw. He was a great artist, and yet in the end the fatal defect brought him to his ruin. It was inevitable, as all tragedies must be.

When other boys wanted to be engineers or firemen, Achilles, from his earliest days, wanted to be a great cracksman. At the age of twelve he was sandpapering his fingertips and experimenting with the safe in his uncle's saloon; at fourteen he saved the money he made selling newspapers and purchased a stethoscope from a reliable fence — to detect the click of the tumblers as he tried to unlock the saloon safe.

Not that such things will work, as you know, Willie. But at that time Achilles was greatly influenced by the exploits of certain heroes of fiction, who, it seems, had hardly to look at a safe before it flew open. You and I know, Willie, that a career in crime takes a single-mindedness of purpose which many people simply do not have the capacity to develop. If I could show you the miles of paper upon which I have practiced certain signatures —

Achilles had the necessary singleness of purpose — the tremendous will to succeed. His handicaps, however, were manifold. Achille's mother was dead, leaving four other children younger than himself. His father, Hector O'Shay, was a boxer of some ability, but unfortunately a great number of blows on the head had caused him to hear bells when none were ringing. The main task of rearing the little O'Shays fell to Achilles. His occupations were many and varied — selling newspapers, running errands, swamping saloons, acting as delivery boy for the ladies on Front Street.

Even so, there was a perpetual scarcity of food and clothing at the

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home of the O'Shays, and one winter, when the mines and smelter were closed and the uncle who ran the saloon could not help them, Christmas approached with none of the money which seems necessary to celebrate the season.

It was a bleak time for Achilles, since he was the oldest and felt responsible for the happiness of the others. It was a Christmas which was to leave its indelible mark, and in the end it was to contribute directly to his downfall. It hurt his pride, that barren Christmas . . .

It was about this time that a copper named Frank Lynch took an interest in Achilles. Lynch was one of those great, moon-faced Irish policemen so sentimentalized in literature and song. He could have been a great con-man — he had intelligence, charm, and that convincing interest in people which is so essential in the true bunco artist. But all his talents were wasted in helping old dames cross the streets and assisting drunks out of saloons on Saturday nights. What a pity!

Officer Lynch was middle-aged when he first acquired an interest in Achilles. He had seen so many movies about Irish cops with hearts of gold that he began to pattern himself after them. As a result, Lynch became the most dangerous kind of copper extant — the copper with sentiment.

He had a large family, all girls, and it became his practice to invite some of the boys from the tough neighborhoods to his house for dinner. Possibly he had a weather eye to the future, though most of the boys he brought home would not be considered suitable husband material, even for a father who was desperate; and while the Lynch daughters were no raving beauties, tending toward carrot-colored hair and freckles, it is also true that no timepieces were ever known to grind to a halt in their vicinity.

One of them, Katherine, was slightly younger than Achilles. She was thirteen or fourteen then, scrawny, freckled, but full of fire. She had none of Copper Lynch's sentiment about Achilles. She would get in a corner where her father couldn't see her and stick out her tongue at Achilles.

It is hard to ignore a girl who keeps putting out her tongue at you. In time she and Achilles became friends in much the same manner as the family cat and dog become friends: they endured each other by the process of keeping their distance.

As a matter of fact, Achilles was beginning to dislike Copper Lynch very much. Lynch had the uncanny knack of being around when Achilles had committed some misdemeanor. If Achilles so much as lifted a spare banana from a fruit stand he would meet Lynch before he had thrown the skin away. And at these meetings he was always prevailed upon to go home to dinner with Lynch — to hear Lynch tell how some hard-working man had been incarcerated. In the stories coppers always tell, the police always triumph.

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Actually, Achilles had never been attracted to what he considered the minor methods of outwitting society. He wished to be the aristocrat of outlaws, the consummate craftsman — the cracksman.

There are serious difficulties, however, in becoming a safe-cracker. You cannot learn the art in college; neither can you go down to the corner drug store and say, "I'm learning to crack a safe. Would you be so kind as to allow me to practice on yours?" Safecracking is an art you learn only by the doing. And with Lynch keeping a constant eye on him, Achilles could not make contact with any of the recognized artists in the field.

The next years of Achilles's life are better glossed over. He simply worked for a living — and honest toil at that.

Lynch got him a job as a hod-carrier on a construction project — hard, bitter work, sufficient to break the spirit of a man who did not have the dream of Achilles O'Shay. Lynch was gradually forcing Achilles into the common mold, making him a hard-working, home-supporting man — the squirrel on the eternal treadmill.

At the same time, and in spite of his ambition, Achilles was also helping Lynch. For Katherine was treating Achilles with such perfect disdain that he began to imagine he was in love with her. He was young, and we all must have our foolish years.

Katherine had grown to a young lady, though she still had a tendency to put out her tongue at people. Her scrawniness had become slenderness, the freckles had dissolved to golden dust, and her hair, through some natural chemical process, had deepened from orange to auburn.

As it happens to nearly every man, the big dream began to fade, and Achilles, Katherine willing, was ready to settle down to the life of an ordinary householder. His younger brothers and sisters were growing up and his responsibility for them was ended. To demonstrate the depths to which he sank I need only point out that for a time he actually considered making an application to the police force!

He had several rivals, of course; young men are notoriously susceptible to sharp-tongued women. Among these rivals was a patrolman named McKenna, and as time went on he and Achilles were the favorites.

The construction firm for which Achilles was working had completed its job and was moving to another part of the state. The foreman liked Achilles and offered to take him along as powder monkey, at a considerable raise in pay. Achilles, thinking how soon he could make a down payment on a rose-covered cottage, agreed; but he forgot one important thing — that propinquity is an essential ingredient in romance.

In six months he was an expert blaster; and in six months Katherine was Mrs. Edward McKenna. There was no blaming the girl; she had been used to bluecoats and size-twelve shoes around the house all her life, and Achilles was not around to take her mind off policemen.

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Achilles did what any normal young man would do in the circumstances. He got drunk, and then swore off women. But Achilles was different from most men: he meant it. For he promptly resumed his study of the art of safecracking.

After finishing his construction job he went to Texas — to the oil fields — where he learned how to handle nitroglycerin. For Achilles it was to be no crude vial of soup extracted from dynamite. In the oil fields he could always lay by a few drops of nitro for the day when he would ply his true vocation.

He worked in the oil fields two years, learning how to handle explosives in massive quantities. In this time he convinced himself he had forgotten Katherine Lynch McKenna.

His first professional job occurred in Montana, in a little mining town not far from Butte. He picked a general store with an old-fashioned iron safe. On the night of July 3, Achilles parked his flivver near the edge of town, and carefully carrying his bottle of nitro, went to the rear of the store and jimmied a window. Shortly after midnight he was ready. Achilles went to the front of the store and made a last check of the street; except for late celebrators in the saloon, the town was peaceful and quiet.

Achilles went back and touched off the fuse, then ducked behind a counter.

But he had worked in the oil fields too long and had overestimated the charge needed.

There was a muffled boom and a flare of light. The safe door sailed the length of the store, crashed through the front window, bounced in the middle of the street, and actually soared through the batwing doors of the saloon.

As is the custom in mining communities, there was no paper money in the safe. For the next minute the air was full of musical chimes as silver dollars skipped through the store and rained into the street. The safe backed gently through the wall into the next room.

Achilles was stunned, not only by the blast but by the failure of his first great artistic effort. He offered no resistance when the town marshal led him away. He was sentenced to five years at Deer Lodge.

The five years at Deer Lodge were intended by society to make a man forget the big dream. But, as I've said, Achilles had the single-mindedness of the born artist. He improved his time by studying the methods of the big-timers who were temporarily detained there For a time his cellmate was Pop Sturges, one of the last of the famous kegmen. It has been said that Pop learned some of his methods from the Jesse James gang. It pleased the old man to reveal the secrets of his technique to Achilles.

Even with congenial companions five years in stir pass slowly. From time to time news of old friends would reach Achilles. His father answered

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the bell of the last round; his brothers and sisters were married and ashamed of their older brother. Police Lieutenant Frank Lynch developed a bad heart and was retired. Patrolman Edward McKenna was killed in the performance of his duties, leaving Katherine with three small children.

At last the warden called Achilles to his office, gave him the parting speech, and opened the front gate. Achilles discovered his parole officer was none other than Frank Lynch. The old copper couldn't get around as he once had, but he was still spry enough to keep his nose deep in Achilles's affairs.

Katherine, broadened by motherhood and saddened by widowhood, still had fire in her hair and eyes. She introduced Achilles to her children as their uncle and was polite enough to him in public; but in private gave him such a tongue-lashing that Achilles wondered if he hadn't been lucky to lose her to Ed McKenna.

Old man Lynch wasted no time in getting Achilles a job — this time as a powderman on a dam project in nearby Iron City. He assumed Achilles would be far enough from civilization to keep out of trouble, but no sooner had Achilles arrived in town than he decided on his next job.

Again Achilles chose the holiday season as the propitious time. On Christmas Eve the Iron City department store would be bulging with the cash spent by last-minute shoppers.

He had a perfect setup. He could leave the construction camp with the rest of the workers, buy some gifts in Iron City for Lynch, Katherine, and the children, have Christmas dinner with them, and after everyone had retired for the night surreptitiously make his way back to Iron City. There he could blow the safe of the department store, then return to the Lynch house. Who would suspect a man staying at the home of his own parole officer? This time there'd be no mistake about the amount of nitro — he'd had five years at Deer Lodge to think about that.

At noon on the twenty-fourth of December a heavy snow began to fall in Iron City — the worst snowstorm in years. It was a perfect night for the job. The police wouldn't be sticking their heads out of the station-house door.

Achilles went to a bar to cash his construction job check. He could go from there to the department store, buy the gifts, and at the same time case the job.

The saloon was crowded, as saloons always are at the holiday season. Achilles cashed his check, and though he cared little for liquor, bought a drink for himself and for an affable stranger standing next to him. Then he proceeded to the department store and picked out a doll for little Katy, a pipe for Lynch, and two policeman's outfits for Eddie and Frankie. He had decided on a warm new coat for Katherine.

When he reached into his pocket, his wallet was gone.

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It didn't take him long to figure it out. The affable stranger in the saloon had been a dip, and Achilles had been the mark.

Achilles was a man not easily given to emotion, but when he saw the clerk put little Katy's doll back into the display case, he would cheerfully have killed the pickpocket. A low, common thief had ruined his Christmas plans for the children.

Under the circumstances he hated to go to Lynch's, but he was expected. It hurt to see Katy, who was getting old enough to expect a flesh-and-blood Santa Claus, looking him over for telltale packages. But the welcome he received was as warm as if he had brought a truckload of gifts. The circle around the fire that Christmas Eve took Achilles back to the times when he was a lad and Copper Lynch had brought him home and Katherine had hidden in the corner to stick out her tongue at him.

Achilles was not an observant man, and it was well into the evening before he noticed how scanty the Lynch preparations for Christmas were. There was a tree, of course, but otherwise the home seemed pretty bare. When he asked Katherine about the children's gifts, she listed them: one simple small gift for each. Achilles, remembering the barren Christmases of his own boyhood, knew there would be nothing for her or the aging parole officer.

The emotion of shame was new to Achilles but now he was bursting with it. But after a while he relaxed. It was too late now to buy anything, but after he cracked the safe he could turn over some of the money — a small enough amount so that Lynch would not become suspicious — saying that he hadn't had time to do any Christmas shopping.

He quivered with impatience after Lynch and Katherine had gone to bed until he could be sure they were asleep. Then he slipped out the window of his room and into the storm.

The snow was still heavy, and the streets were deserted. Achilles, afraid of Lynch's acuteness, doubled back several times, but soon he was convinced that no one was trailing him. He planned to enter the store through the skylight, and would leave no trail across the roof.

It was tricky, getting down into the store through the skylight. A balcony inside the store protruded far enough so that its edge was directly under the edge of the skylight. Achilles had merely to drop through at an angle. But if he missed it was nearly 30 feet straight down to the main floor. As he jumped he tried not to think about the cotton-wrapped bottle of nitro in his pocket.

He made it safely, and once inside his first thought was to provide a means of exit. In a janitor's supply room he found a tall stepladder. This he balanced on the edge of the balcony. He saw that when he climbed up to the skylight there would be no turning back: the thrust of his legs would topple the ladder over the edge of the balcony.

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Achilles's work on that safe was a thing of beauty and a joy forever. Within a half hour he had fired his charge; the safe door dropped forward onto the blankets with hardly a sound and all the money within had only to be scooped out. As in the other store, most of it was silver, making a heavy load to carry. Achilles opened the sack he had brought with him and emptied the contents of the safe into it. When it was full, it weighed nearly 60 pounds.

There was no sound of a burglar alarm, no flash of light from the street. Luck was with Achilles as he finished his artistic masterpiece.

Now, as I have told you, Achilles did not think of thievery in any terms except safecracking. But on his way back to the balcony he had the misfortune to pass a counter piled high with toys.

He thought of the McKenna children coming down to the bare Christmas tree in just a few more hours. And there was a doll for little Katy in a showcase not three feet away.

Achilles went to the linen department and found some pillow slips. Then he took the doll for Katy. In the men's department he found a whole set of pipes for the old man. He could not find the policeman suits for the boys, but he stuffed a pillow slip full of fire engines, water guns, and other toys. He went to the women's department and selected a fur coat for Katherine. When he returned for the sack of money, he closely resembled the traditional Santa Claus.

The stepladder to the skylight was balanced precariously. Each slow step threatened to plunge him down to the main floor. He was carrying the heavy bags with both hands, and could not use them to assist his balance.

He realized he should leave some of the bags behind and make another trip, but he also knew that the ladder would probably not remain there. And, as in every job, he had reached that cold moment when his nerve was used up. He could not bear the thought of descending a second time into that empty, echoing store.

No, he did not have the nerve to make a second trip, but he also could not go through the skylight with all those encumbrances.

So, teetering in the dark in the top of the store, Achilles faced his dilemma. What should he leave behind? Katy's doll? Katherine's coat? The toys for the boys?

Achilles pondered. And then the fundamental weakness of his character asserted itself. His hubris took charge. He dropped the sack containing the money.

He pushed the toys through the skylight and climbed after them. The ladder clattered down as his final step thrust it behind him.

Achilles O'Shay had realized his life's dream. He had done a perfect job of blowing a safe — but he had failed to cash in on it.

He headed back to the Lynch home through the steadily falling snow of early Christmas morning, slipped into

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the house, distributed the gifts around the tree, and went to sleep. It seemed only a few minutes before he awoke to find the gifts piled neatly in his bedroom and Lynch glowering at him. By bad luck the old man had got up first.

Achilles could see, as the old copper could, the little pool of melted snow around his shoes.

"This is a very fine fur coat," Lynch said. "Too bad you had to shop for it in the middle of the night."

"Look," Achilles said. "You've got me and it's back to Deer Lodge for me. But I've enough money on the books at the construction camp to pay for the gifts."

"They're stolen," the old man said. "Do you think Katherine, or the kids, or I could enjoy them knowing you hadn't got them honest?"

"I'll pay for them," begged Achilles. "I'll pay the money and the time, but please keep them. If it means anything to you, I've blown my last safe."

Lynch jumped to his feet. "You've blown a safe? Where's the loot?"

Achilles was still thinking of the children. "I'll tell you only if you promise to take these gifts."

"You'll tell if I have to pound it out of you!"

"Only if Katherine and the children get their Christmas presents," Achilles insisted.

Like all coppers, Lynch's main concern was the recovery of the swag. So he agreed.

"It's still in the store, right where I left it," Achilles said. "Merry Christmas, copper."

In the end, because Lynch again spoke up for him, they gave Achilles only twelve months, though he's still making payments on the safe he ruined.

Willie the Squeak rolled over on his bunk and opened one eye. "What's the rest of it?" he squeaked.

"Achilles's artistic life came to an end with that one masterpiece. He makes an honest living now — there isn't a better blaster in the state. Now and then he opens a safe for someone who has lost the combination. But only under official supervision, you understand."

"But what about the rest of it?"

"Oh, he married Katherine at last, and that ended the big dream. Old Lynch lives with them and keeps an eye on his grandchildren."

"I don't get this hubris thing," Willie said.

"With Achilles it was sentiment. That was the thing the gods were jealous of his having."

"You're stir-crazy," Willie squeaked. "Good night, Professor."

"Good night, Willie." The Professor sighed. He walked to the handmade calendar and crossed off another date. Only three thousand six hundred and fifty more days and it would be another Christmas — and he would be with the people buying cravats that were too bright, négligées that were too thin . . .

The Professor had his hubris too.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

W. C. King's "Weak Spot" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Tenth Annual Contest. Accompanying the manuscript was the following interesting letter: "Ever since my wife placed in your 1952 contest [wrote Mr. King], I have been wondering why I couldn't write a story that would be as good — and maybe a lot more ominous." Well, we looked it up, and Mr. King was right: his wife, Lillian King, had her first story, "Try to Remember," published in EQMM, issue of January 1954. Mr. King's story proved to be just what he said: a tale of quiet menace and slowly mounting tension. To the best of our recollection, this is the first time in more than fourteen years of publication that both a husband and wife, writing individual stories, have had their debuts in print in EQMM.

Mr. King was educated at the University of Arizona and at Cornell, graduating as an electrical engineer. Except for a year and a half with a French Escadrille during World War I, he has been engaged in sales engineering ever since. He and his wife have belonged to a writers' group for some time, and Mr. King has "taken several flings at writing short stories;" but with no success until EQMM accepted "Weak Spot." The only previous publication he has had were "exciting pieces like 'The Selection of Correct Synchronous Motor Torques'." Seeing his engineering articles in print gave Mr. King a great deal of gratification — but, he informs us, nothing like the thrill of having his first fictional story accepted. Mrs. King has sold several stories since her first appearance in EQMM, and now Mr. King thinks his experience may parallel his wife's. Indeed, we hope so, Mr. King — and the best of luck to you both.

WEAK SPOT

by W. C. KING

MR. EDWARDS STEERED HIS CADILlac into the Third Street Tunnel, heading home. No one was waiting for him at home — no one, except the wire-haired terrier, Mickey. But Mickey would be glad to see him.

Mr. Edwards had hated to leave the game at the Los Angeles Athletic Club — to cash in when luck was with him — but he wanted to be alert for that

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subdivision real estate deal tomorrow.

He liked poker. To him poker was more than just a game of cards. There was a lot of psychology in it — sizing up the other fellow's character.

Suddenly he was forced to brake the car. After midnight it was unusual to come to a stop in the tunnel. Some impatient soul behind him sounded his horn at the delay, and the echo reverberated against the dingy walls. Mr. Edwards, a big comfortable man with a shock of gray hair, grinned, settled back, and lit a cigarette.

Without warning the right-hand door of his car opened. It happened so quickly that the intruder was in the seat beside him before Mr. Edwards could protest. Something hard was pressed against his bottom rib.

"Just turn South on Figueroa, Mister."

Mr. Edwards stole a quick glance at the fellow. The face was a blur of pasty white, but the voice sounded oddly familiar. In the dim lights of the tunnel, he could make out a long, slim figure in coveralls and a felt hat pulled down on the forehead, almost covering the bandage over one eye.

Bandage . . . bandage . . . He had it!

"Why, Alabam!" He exclaimed heartily. "You remember me — Mr. Edwards?" He thrust out his hand. "You can put that gun back into your pocket. You wouldn't want to accidentally shoot an old friend."

The gun prodded a little harder. "Just keep both them hands on the wheel, Mr. Edwards."

Both hands went to the top of the wheel, where Alabam would have no difficulty seeing them. A little aggrieved, Mr. Edwards said, "I thought you and I were pretty good friends out at that old Lincoln Heights Jailhouse."

"Sure, I liked you all right. I got nothing against you *now*. But things is different now — you a business man with a big Cadillac, and me holding you up."

Mr. Edwards recalled the first time he had seen Alabam — it was his third day trying to adjust himself to jail. It had seemed some horrible nightmare. James E. Edwards, Stanford law graduate, solid citizen of Beverly Hills — Impossible for him to be in jail with a lot of drunks and bums!

As soon as he had made bail on the drunk-driving charge, he had engaged one of the best lawyers in Los Angeles with the promise of a fat fee. No price was too great to save Mary and the girls from the shame of it. He couldn't go to jail, no matter what it cost.

But he had gone to jail. For 30 days.

After two days of pacing up and down the narrow aisle between the rows of triple-decked bunks, and trying to read the battered pulp magazines loaned by fellow inmates, Mr. Edwards had been assigned to work on the Kitchen Detail. That was where he met Alabam.

Out on the food-storage porch Mr. Edwards had seated himself on an empty box next to the tall young fellow, who was lounging on a sack of potatoes. A curly-haired fellow, idly fondling the one-eyed yellow

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cat that belonged to the cook. He was, Mr. Edwards guessed, about twenty-five. With a little grooming, he might look good on TV.

Mr. Edwards had held out a pack of cigarettes, saying, "My name's Jim Edwards. What's yours?"

"Mostly folks calls me Alabam. I was born in Alabama," he said lazily, "but I been a lot of places since."

As the days dragged by, Mr. Edwards learned that Alabam had, indeed, "been lots of places." Many of these places had been jails — jails from Georgia to California. Alabam did not particularly enjoy jail, but he accepted these interludes philosophically as a normal part of his life — that is, if your philosophy of life was to live off the citizens who worked and stayed out of jails.

Apparently Alabam had never done an honest day's toil. He worked on the Kitchen Detail, of course, at the head cook's direction, and he worked cheerfully. Doubtless he had worked at many other jail tasks. But he had never worked of his own volition.

The only men Mr. Edwards knew who did not work were some of the older members of the Beverly Golf Club who could boast bulging safe-deposit boxes. The fact that Alabam had never collected a day's pay had fascinated Mr. Edwards.

Now they were swinging down Figueroa, almost to Wilshire Boulevard. Although Mr. Edwards felt rebuffed, he decided to try again.

"Why don't we turn onto Wilshire? Go out to my house in Beverly Hills and I'll give you a drink? The family's away," he added hopefully.

"Just keep on down Figueroa, Mr. Edwards. I never drink when I'm on a job."

On a job! Mr. Edwards gripped the wheel. He recalled a morning when Alabam had spoken casually of one of his "jobs." They had been standing out on the storage porch, having a cigarette between chores, when the sleek gray cars of the *Lark* slid by.

"I like to ride them snooty trains," Alabam mused. "I like to ride around in taxicabs, too." He chuckled reminiscently, "Sure had me a scared taxi driver one night."

"What scared him?" Mr. Edwards had asked curiously.

"Why, when I got him out to a side street, I said, 'This is where I live.' So he pulled up and I stepped out and then reached back in the window and stuck a gun in his neck." Alabam's grin had been boyish. "He started shaking like he had the chills and then he told he had a wife and three kids."

Mr. Edwards remembered that it had sounded like a game the way Alabam told it — not at all like an armed robbery.

"I tell you," Alabam had grown earnest that day, "you never should talk when you're taking a guy's money."

"Why not?" Mr. Edwards asked in his ignorance.

"Because if the cops catch up with you and put you in the line-up, maybe this guy whose money you took will remember your voice."

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He had lit the cigarette Mr. Edwards had offered. "Tell you something else: put a bandage over one eye. You can slip it off and throw it away soon's you're through with the guy. Then when he tells the cops about it, they go running around looking for somebody with a black eye or something."

They slowed down now for a street car turning west on Pico.

"That's what made me remember you tonight — that bandage."

"What?" Alabam asked sharply.

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking out loud about something you told me one day. Did you ever read . . ." His voice trailed off. He'd forgotten: Alabam couldn't read. After a pause, he said, "Did you recognize me there in the tunnel?"

"No, Mr. Edwards. A big car — I figured the guy driving a Cadillac would have a fat wallet." After a moment he said, "I sure am sorry I picked your car."

That was better. Mr. Edwards breathed more easily. Alabam wasn't such a bad fellow after all. It shouldn't be too hard to work on an inferior intellect like Alabam's. Use psychology on him — wait a couple of blocks, then suggest again that they drive out to his house for a drink. Alabam had once described some wild drinking bouts in his lazy drawl.

He might even invite Alabam to spend the night. Then load his drinks until he passed out. Get hold of his gun. There wouldn't be anything to it. Alabam would be flattered at being asked to spend the night in a place like the Edwards' home.

Queerly he was reminded of a night Alabam had mentioned — a night when Alabam had fled over the flat roofs of Skid Row . . .

"I saw a light and there was a window open, so I dived in and the cops kept right on running by. There was an old wino lying on the bed and he kind of sits up and wants to know what the hell I'm doing in his room that way. I see a jug of wine setting on the dresser, so I grabs it and tells the old jughead that I just brought him some wine. He's so drunk he don't know the difference. He takes a big swig and lays back and starts snoring like a buzz saw."

Mr. Edwards had laughed appreciatively. "What did you do then?"

"Why, I reckoned maybe it'd be better if I didn't go out on the street for a while, so I kind of moved the old wino over and lay down there and slept all night. Purtiest li'l cat layin' there, too. When the old guy wakes up, he starts blinking at me and says. 'What the hell *you* doing in here? So I says, 'Don't you remember we got this wine last night?' Then I gave him a dollar for using his room. I took the cat with me — that was the filthiest room I'd been in for a long time."

Sure, Alabam had a soft spot. Hadn't he given the old wino a dollar?

"Yeah," said Alabam again, "I sure am sorry I picked your car. I figured I'd just have the guy drive out of town a little ways and after I took his

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money I'd let the air out of a couple tires. Then when I got out of sight I'd peel off these coveralls and throw away this bandage I got on my head and the cops never would find me."

"Well," Mr. Edwards swallowed. "What are your plans now?"

"Why, we're gonna drive down towards San Pedro. There's some roads down there that hardly nobody drives on. I'll just leave you in the car and catch a bus back to town."

"You'll leave . . ." The knuckles on the wheel were white. "You'll leave me there? Just what do you mean, Alabam?"

"Why, Mr. Edwards," Alabam explained reasonably, "you just know too much about me."

Mr. Edwards had always refused to think about death. He had a large insurance policy that would take care of Mary and the two girls, but he had never visualized it actually being paid to them. Maybe in half an hour or so. . . . No, he couldn't imagine it. What was the matter with him? All he had to do was to keep his head, to handle this kid the way he sized up his poker buddies.

"Listen, Alabam, I've got about a hundred on me. If you need more than that, I can get it to you. I've got a secret safe out at my place."

"Thank you, Mr. Edwards. Reckon I'll just make out with the cash you got on you." Alabam shifted his long legs and settled his body more comfortably on the deep cushions.

"Well, then —" Mr. Edwards was carefully casual — "if you don't want to go out to the house, why don't I give you this hundred now? Then drop you wherever you want to go?"

A long moment passed. The car rolled on.

Mr. Edwards, his voice sounding tighter than he had meant it to, continued, "You know I wouldn't turn you in, Alabam. And this cash — I can spare it. I had a lucky streak playing poker tonight."

"That's what you say now, Mr. Edwards, and maybe you mean it now. But you might feel different in the morning and turn in a report. Then some time they pick me up and they have you come down to the line-up and . . . no, sir, you just know too much about me. I told you too many things back there in jail."

Sweat broke out on Mr. Edwards, and with it came panic. "But killing me. . . . Suppose you were caught?"

After a long pause Alabam repeated, "I sure am sorry I happened to pick your car, Mr. Edwards."

The red light was against them at Washington Boulevard. While they waited for it to change, a police officer came out of the gas station on the corner and strolled over to his motorcycle, only a few feet from the Cadillac. Mr. Edwards had never cared particularly for police officers. Motorcycle cops seemed to pick on Cadillac drivers, and the jailers at Lincoln Heights had infuriated him with their petty tyrannies. Now he realized how vitally important an alert police force was to a civilized community.

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Alabam gave no sign of having noticed the uniform. Mr. Edwards wondered what he could do to attract attention. Possibly if he turned his headlights off and on — He started to drop one hand carelessly from the wheel to the dashboard.

The pressure against his ribs increased sharply. "Just sit quiet, Mr. Edwards," came the soft drawl.

Mr. Edwards tried desperately to catch the officer's eye. Possibly he could convey some message.

"The light's green now," prompted Alabam.

A nimbus of fog shrouded the road ahead. They were getting close to the San Pedro area. With each mile Mr. Edwards grew more aware of the chill in the air. When they reached open country, a wind came up and Mr. Edwards could hear the rustling of the trees above the soft hum of the motor. Kay, who was majoring in English Lit., had sent home a poem about "lost souls rustling in the dark of the night."

Mr. Edwards had given precious little thought to his own immortal soul, assuming that he had one. Now he began to wonder. What became of a man's soul?

Suddenly Mr. Edwards's shoulders straightened. He had found Alabam's weak spot. Work on his love of animals. A new feeling of confidence gave his voice a convincing heartiness.

"Bet I've got something out at the house that you'd like — my dog, Mickey. He's locked up in the house and there won't be anybody to feed him. You see, my two daughters are in Stanford and my wife's gone up to Palo Alto for the Big Game . . ."

Careful now — like moving in on Charley Tuttle tonight when he had hesitated for just an instant in betting that pat hand. Mr. Edwards twisted his mouth into a smile.

"Mickey is a pedigreed wirehair. A real throughbred, but I'm away a lot — you could take better care of him than I can. Tell you what Alabam, I'm going to *give* Mickey to you." Mr. Edwards paused an instant for effect. "He cost three hundred dollars."

"You paid three hundred dollars for a *dog?*" Alabam sounded incredulous.

Now was the time to press his advantage. All you had to do was find a man's weak spot. "Yes, sir! Three hundred dollars — but that was when he was a pup. He's worth a lot more now. Now we'll just swing around and I'll drive you out so you can see *your* dog."

"But Mr. Edwards, I like cats — I don't like dogs. Now you just turn down that next road to the right," said Alabam softly, "that road with all them trees."

Somehow Mr. Edwards turned the car as Alabam directed, toward the looming grove of trees. Then suddenly, from nowhere, a kitten darted out into the road.

Mr. Edwards found himself praying and sweating as he deliberately veered the car toward the cat.

"You gonna kill that li'l cat!" Alabam yelled. Seizing the wheel, Alabam swung the heavy car to the right. As

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Alabam thrust his head out and looked back, Mr. Edwards drove his right foot forward, releasing all the power of the Cadillac's brakes.

Alabam was thrown heavily against the dashboard. There was a splintering of glass, and in the confusion Mr. Edwards managed to get hold of the long-barreled gun. His desperate swing struck Alabam just above the bandage. The lanky figure slid to the floor.

Mr. Edwards sat staring at his own hands and at the gun they still clutched. Then he looked out into the darkness. The cat's eyes glowed. Alive!

God, how wonderful it felt to be alive!

"O"

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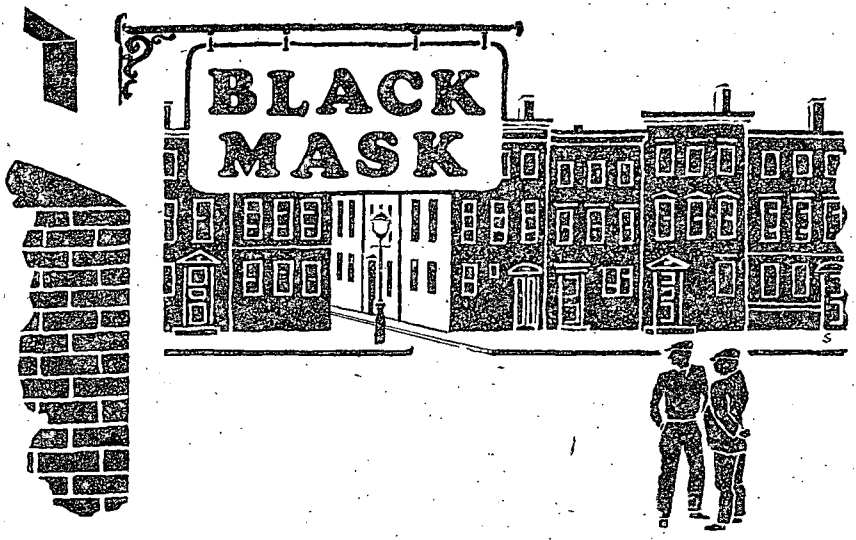

THE HAWK AND THE PULLET

by C. S. MONTANYE

"THIRD TABLE FROM THE LEFT," Anson said. "What do you see?"

Kirby looked.

"A honey of a dame."

Anson outlined his chin with his fingers. He rubbed the back of his hand on it. He began to smile. It was a crooked, enigmatic smile.

"Second table, right of the band," he said. "What do you see?"

Kirby turned his blond head.

"A tough-looking guy in a tuxedo."

"What's he doing?"

"Watching the swell dame."

Anson smiled faintly and nodded.

"It's nobody's business, not ours, anyway. Still, when you get a honey of a gal like her and set her out to be watched by a punk like him, you've got something. She knows him, too. She's trying to write him off, make out she's never seen him, doesn't even know he's there."

Kirby looked skeptical. He admired Anson's perspicacity. Once the Broadwayite had given him six Aqueduct winners in a row. Doubtful, he had let them go, one by one, without a wager. Yes, Anson was smart.

"But I don't see anything unusual

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in the layout," Kirby said. "I like to look at pretty girls, whether they know me or not."

Anson lighted a cigarette. Tinker's Tavern, Longacre and 47th, was crowded with the after-theater mob. Its famous Mirror Bar had them standing three deep. The clink of glasses, pop of corks, and music of cocktail shakers was a constant rhythm. Kirby supposed the sudden rain on Broadway was partially responsible for the full house.

"The plug in the broadcloth is Harry Capstan," Anson said. "He's a tiger man for a wheel house near the Circle. He brings the victims in to be cleaned at roulette. He's got a prison record as long as your arm."

"The girl," Kirby pointed out, "doesn't look like gambling-house fodder."

"All the more reason," Anson said, "why it's interesting. He knows her; she knows him. He's a hawk; she's a pullet. What does he want with her? Let's watch. It's nobody's business, but it kills time."

Kirby moved his glance back to the third table from the left. The girl was a knockout. She wore a simple dark blue dress under a velvet wrap. She had no hat. Her softly waved hair was a mixture of gold and brown. The smoky rafter lamps made it glimmer. Her oval face, long-lashed eyes, and red, provocative mouth were perfect. There wasn't the look of the main thoroughfare about her. Yet the trademark of her youthful unsophistication was lost in a certain indefinable hardness. The girl had lived and looked at life.

She was with an inconspicuous young man. His suit was gray. There was nothing distinguishing about him. He might have been a clerk, a millionaire, a bookmaker, or a stage hero. A bottle of beer was before him. His back was to Harry Capstan. Occasionally he smiled at something the girl said.

A waiter stepped up to the table. He spoke to the youth in the gray suit. The young man pushed his glass back and got up.

"Wanted on the telephone," Anson said. "Watch what happens now."

"What do you think's due?" Kirby asked.

"Watch," Anson directed.

The girl's escort was hardly out of sight before Capstan was in his chair. He put his elbows on the table. He leaned forward. He spoke rapidly. The girl listened, motionless, her eyes veiled by her lashes.

"Propositioning her," Anson said. "It's nobody's business, but I wish I had an ear big enough to stretch over there. He's unloading it fast. He's afraid Gray Suit will slide back before he's had his say. Notice how he glances over his shoulder?"

"Do you suppose the waiter's drop-around was a phony?" Kirby asked.

"It looks like it. Fake telephone call to get him out for a minute. Capstan's finished. He's taking an exit. The girl's no blank. She's thinking over what he told her."

The youth came back to the table.

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He said something to the girl. She got up, with her wrap over her arm. She was of medium height, beautifully proportioned. The youth picked a way through the crowd to the foyer. Just before she followed her companion out, she turned and glanced back over her shoulder.

Harry Capstan, Kirby noticed, was smiling.

"Well," he said, "no matter what it was it's over."

"It's just begun," Anson corrected. "I recognized Gray Suit. He's young Scott Boyd. Heard of him?"

"The playwright?"

"I thought you'd register."

Kirby frowned. Scott Boyd's smart comedy, *Good Manners*, was in its fortieth week at the Stuyvesant. A picture firm had bought it for the cameras. It was Boyd's second box-office success. Kirby envied him. Kirby's own efforts at playwriting had not been remunerative. An agent was still peddling his wares up and down the stem.

"What do you mean, it's just begun?" he asked.

Anson folded the bar check in half.

"If you're not busy for the next couple of hours I'll show you."

They went out into the steady, monotonous drizzle that superseded the night's sudden rain. The lights were smeared. Street and sidewalks were black silk. The gutters still ran brimming. Taxis scuttled about. Anson turned up his collar.

"Straight across to Galinat's," he directed.

They dodged through a red traffic light. On the opposite side of Broadway, Anson ducked into a building and went up a flight of stairs. Kirby shook rain from his hat. On the second floor Anson went down a corridor. He stopped before a door. It was lettered with the name, *Max Galinat*. Below was the explanation that old gold and silver might be sold at good prices within.

A bell tinkled when Anson opened the door. Kirby stepped into a barely furnished office. A desk, a table, a telephone, and three or four chairs comprised its appointments. On the table were a pair of jeweler's scales and a box of graduated weights. The man who sat at the table, sorting an accumulation of rings, empty watch cases, brooches, and other dismantled pieces of jewelry, was small, dark, and thin. He wore a green eyeshade. In the open drawer of the table Kirby saw a flat automatic.

The man looked up.

"Hello, Anson," he said.

"Hello, Max." Anson nodded to Kirby. "Meet my friend Kirby. Some day you'll see one of his shows. You'll have to pay to get in, too."

"The theater is dead," Galinat said. "Plays are written and produced for the cloak and suit trade. There's no art."

Anson outlined his chin with his fingers.

"Who did Scott Boyd marry?"

Max Galinat pushed up his eyeshade.

"A girl named Chandler."

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"Libby Chandler?"

"That's right."

Kirby said: "Has she brown-gold hair?"

"And lots of class," Galinat added.

"That must have been his wife he was with," Kirby said to Anson.

"How long has he been married, Max?"

"A couple of months."

"Were they hooked in town here?"

"At the Municipal Building chapel."

Anson nodded. "Thanks, Max. I'll see you get a pass for Kirby's first show."

Galinat shrugged.

"I hope it's better than the last one I saw, two years ago."

"Who is he?" Kirby asked, when they left.

"Max used to be a pigeon for the police department. They got to know him. He outlived his usefulness and opened up in this trade. What he isn't wise to isn't worth memorizing."

"So the girl came here from Chicago."

"So did Capstan. Coincidence. We'll take a cab — if we can find one."

They had to wait ten minutes in the shelter of a drug store awning. Anson conferred with the driver of the taxi that finally stopped at their signal. The run wasn't long. A half-dozen streets north, one west. They pulled in before an old-fashioned private house. Anson gave the chauffeur a dollar.

He led the way up brownstone steps. A man opened the inner door. He looked out at them before admitting them.

"Good evening, Mr. Anson. Haven't seen you for a long time."

"Barney around?"

"He's upstairs in the lounge."

"We'll find him. This gentleman's a friend of mine. The name's Kirby, Stanley Kirby. He writes plays. Want to produce one?"

The house was richly decorated. With a familiarity born of frequent visits, Anson directed his steps down a passage and up to double doors.

They stood ajar. Light gushed from the room beyond. Anson pulled the doors wide and walked in with Kirby.

"Don't get up," he said to the gross, florid man who sprawled on one end of a red leather divan. A bottle of Scotch, a glass, ice pail, and siphon were on a table beside it. "Is Harry Capstan on your payroll, Barney?"

The man shook his head.

"I streeted him a month ago. He's so crooked he has to lock up his own roll at night — so he won't get up and weed it."

Anson reflected. "Four weeks ago? What's he been doing since?"

"Nothing that I know of."

"Four weeks," Anson mused. "That should put him in a position to need scratch. Ever hear of Libby Chandler?"

"No. Who is she?"

"Just a gal, a good-looking doll, from Chi."

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"So they have them there, too?"

"Where'd Capstan live when he was working for you?"

"What is this — a gag?" Barney asked.

"Not exactly. Call it a hunch. We're circulating around — my pal here and I — trying to tuck a rainy night in. I'm interested in Harry Capstan. Find out where he lives now."

Barney sighed. He shook his head. He got up with an effort. He went over to a wall telephone.

"Eddie," he said, "where does Capstan live?"

He listened, hung up, and returned to the divan. Anson pulled down his cuff.

"Lend me a pencil," he said to Kirby. "If you write plays you must be alive with them."

"Capstan," Barney said, "has a furnished apartment in the Shanleigh Chambers. It's located on Twenty-third Street near Ninth Avenue."

"I made a mistake," Anson told Kirby, when they descended the stoop steps. "I should have told that tin-can pilot to wait. We'll get a little wet hoofing it over to the Alley."

"Rain's good for the complexion," Kirby said. "Are you paying Capstan a visit?"

"I expect to."

"What's the idea?"

"Curiosity — principally. When Boyd left the table, Capstan made a date with Libby Chandler. It's an even-money bet she'll go to his rooms. We'll drop down and take a gander. No harm; it won't cost anything." He whistled shrilly for a cab. "Still live at the Surrey?" he asked Kirby.

"Yes, but —"

"The Surrey," Anson told the chauffeur. "I want you to get one of your plays. Bring it along," he said to Kirby.

"What's the idea?"

"Do what I ask and let it go at that."

The Surrey was a bachelor apartment on East Fifty-third Street. Kirby went to his rooms. He got a copy of one of his plays. When he returned to the cab he found Anson missing.

"He's in that drug store on the corner," the taxi driver said.

Anson came back after a few minutes.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. I had to make a phone call. Got the play?"

"Right here."

"Roll it up and put it in your pocket. The Shanleigh Chambers, driver. Know where it is?"

"Like the smile on my mother's face."

"Move."

Kirby leaned back against the worn upholstery.

"Didn't you come from Chicago?"

"I used to operate there," Anson said. "For a couple of years I had a half-interest in the Oasis, a night spot in the Loop. Did nice business.

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Elegant floor show. One morning a guy named Lyndheim got himself erased in one of the private rooms. The cops put on the pressure. I sold my fifty percent for what I could get and came East. I like it here."

The taxi continued downtown.

"What are you going to do if Boyd's wife isn't at Capstan's?"

"I never cross my bridges until I see my dentist," Anson smiled.

They drew up in front of the Shanleigh Chambers. The building rose in high, narrowing tiers. Anson told the taxi man to wait. Kirby went inside with him. A uniformed hall attendant confronted them.

"Capstan," Anson said.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Don't say anyone. This is a surprise party. We'll go right up."

The man hesitated.

"It's against the rules, sir. Everyone has to be announced."

Anson walked toward the elevators.

"Break 'em for once and see how it feels. Nobody's going to get you in trouble. If we throw a surprise party for Capstan whose business is it? What floor did you say?"

"Fifteen A."

Kirby noticed Anson's thin, shrewd face shadowed when they stopped at Capstan's door. The corridor was quiet. Anson pressed a thumb over the pearl circle of the bell. A minute or two passed before the door opened. A colored man looked sleepily out.

"Is Mr. Capstan home?" Anson asked. "Don't bother, we'll go right in."

He gave Kirby the office with a look. They brushed by the Negro. The hall was wide and strewn with rugs. At its far end a room was shut off by velvet portieres. They parted. Harry Capstan came out.

"What is it, Sam?" he inquired sharply.

"Just a couple of late callers," Anson said.

Capstan stepped back.

"Who —"

"Mrs. Boyd here yet?" Anson passed Capstan. In the small lounge-room on the other side of the draperies, he looked at the girl who had got quickly up from the chair where she had been sitting. "Good evening, Mrs. Boyd. I had an idea you'd be here."

She said nothing. There was wonder in her pretty face. She stared at Anson with parted lips. Kirby saw that at close range Libby Chandler was more attractive than he had at first imagined. The shaded lamplight softened her expression. Her skin was like damask, glowing, warm. Her eyes, an intense blue, were clear and bright. Her mouth was a red bow.

"What is this?" Harry Capstan demanded.

"That," Anson said, "is what we came to find out. Suppose you tell us, Mrs. Boyd? It's nobody's business, of course, but we'd like to know. What are you doing down here? What sort of a proposition is this egg spraying you with?"

The blue eyes moved over Anson. The girl glanced briefly in Kirby's

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direction. She seemed to relax. She drew a little breath and sat down.

Capstan walked over to a mahogany secretary. He opened the top drawer. Kirby, watching him, saw him reach in.

"I wouldn't bring out any artillery," Anson said mildly.

Capstan shoved the drawer shut.

"Come on, what's it about?" he said belligerently.

"Suppose I take a guess and tell you." Anson slipped off his topcoat and draped it over a chair. He gave Kirby a nod. He pulled down his cuffs and took a cigarette from a silver case. "My guess," he continued, "is that you've got Libby down here to ante up some cash. Boyd's doing pretty well these days, what with picture rights and his gross at the Stuyvesant. How much is he asking?" he said to the girl.

"Five thousand," she answered slowly.

Anson struck a deliberate match for his cigarette.

"Can you raise it?"

She shook her head.

"Not without Scott — my husband — knowing."

"And if you don't come across," Anson went on, "he'll spill past history?"

"Yes," she said.

Kirby noticed a muscle twitching in Capstan's hard, inscrutable face.

"Then Boyd doesn't know about your two-year visit at that Illinois seminary?"

"No."

Anson dropped the ash from his cigarette into an onyx tray.

"How did you slip him to keep this appointment?"

"I told a lie. I said I — I had to see a girl who worked in a show with me once. I said I'd be back in an hour."

Anson looked at his watch. He turned to Harry Capstan.

"You're a rat. If I had my way I'd telephone for a couple of flatfeet to step around and take you for a walk. If I do you'll open that big yap of yours and talk. If I don't you'll be permanently muzzled. So I won't."

Capstan's eyes narrowed.

"Much obliged," he said shortly. "That's certainly sweet of you."

Anson turned back to the girl.

"Don't ever pay him a penny, Mrs. Boyd. And don't let him frighten you. His threats aren't worth a dime a dozen."

She gave him a strained, anxious look.

"You mean —"

"When it comes to spilling past history," Anson said, "I can tip a couple of buckets myself. Capstan knows what I mean. I don't think he'll bother you again. In fact, I'm sure of it."

The girl's slim, white hands moved unsteadily.

"You don't know how much this means —"

"I think I do. That hour's almost up," Anson said. "I think we'll start back. I've got a taxi waiting. We'll drop you off anywhere you want."

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They left her at a hotel in the seventies.

"We'd better stop at Guido's for a drink," Anson suggested.

"You knew Mrs. Boyd in Chicago?"

"She used to work for me at the Oasis. Song and dance. I took her on after her stretch. She was in for pennyweighting: shoplifting to you. She claimed she was framed. Maybe yes, maybe no."

"And you've got something on Capstan strong enough to keep him quiet?"

Anson pushed out his long legs.

"I've always had an idea he handled the trigger work that morning at my place. There was some kind of a feud between Lyndheim and the gamblers. Capstan slid out of town in a hurry. He hasn't been back since."

Kirby dropped a hand to the bulge in his pocket.

"What about this play?"

"That was an out in case Boyd followed Libby to Capstan's apartment. I thought it would be nice if he found you reading it to all three of us. Sort of homey. Perhaps it's just as well he didn't show up."

"Why?"

Anson laughed.

"It might be a rotten play." He leaned and rubbed breath moisture from the taxi window. "Take a look. It's stopped raining."

YOU CAN WIN $1,000!

See the February issue of EQMM for details

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **SAUL LEVINSON**

TITLE: ***Get Off My Back!***

TYPE: Detective Story in the realistic tradition of **Black Mask**

DETECTIVE: Jackson, a "hick law-man"

LOCALE: Sparter, Texas; population: 3,544

COMMENTS: *A hard, uncompromising story so sharply written it's pungent, so full of exact, convincing detail it's both photographic and impressionistic . . .*

GUS KNEW THEY DIDN'T HAVE anything on him — nothing at all. But Jackson, the plainclothes, came for him at Marty's Snooker Club. "Just come with me," he said, like church was the next stop.

Gus's cigarette hissed out in the spittoon. "Where to?"

Jackson shrugged. He was 40-something, with a barrel chest that was fighting to keep above his waistline. He had slate-gray in his hair and in his eyes. The dove-colored shirt was frayed and the law-pants not wide enough at the legs. The hick law in a hick town in Texas at the end of nowhere.

Gus knew who he was, all right. You're in a town for a while and you hang around and somebody says, "That's Jackson," and you say, "Yeah? What's he do?" Somebody says, "You. He does you, boy. He's dipped in the law. You get close enough you can smell it on him."

Gus had had a lungful. One day — just a day with nothing in it — Jackson had stopped his car and left the door open. He stared at Gus a long time, looking him up and down. Five-foot eight, lean and wiry, light hair, tanned face. Blue jeans and white cotton T shirt. Maybe he doesn't like my looks, Gus thought. So what?

"Just come with me," Jackson said.

In the room at the county courthouse they sat down and Jackson sighed. "What's your living?" he asked. He sounded tired.

"I get by." It was a flat statement.

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"Doing what?"

"I got a little money."

"You room at Peterson's."

"Yeah. It's illegal?"

"You got plans? Job plans?"

"I'm a tourist." Gus reached out his billfold. "I got dough. I'm no vag." He leaned back and lit a cigarette.

Jackson didn't once call him by name. "You'll remember we've got you lined up. Pretty soon you'll have a job or you'll go out. That's the way we do it here."

Here. Sparter, Texas. Seat of a cotton and oil county, but no bright lights. Just a sign at the city limits claiming 3,544 people and saying the water supply was approved. An East Texas boom town ten years before when a wildcatter put down a hole and it spewed high-grade crude oil. A town that had its fling, then settled into just another burg with a little yelling on Saturday night. Derricks still dotting the cotton and corn fields, but the wells on the pump now. Just like the town, Gus thought. A played-out dump on the pump.

"You'll get a job or go," Jackson said again.

So what? There was another county not far away and it had a seat, too. But Gus wanted to sit in this one. Now that he'd met Jackson he wanted to sit in this one like an easy chair and put out his shoes to be shined.

He thought about Jackson. The law didn't have to be too smart to find out Gus's name and send it in. They'd let him know about the record. Not a big record. In one pen for burglary — at twenty-four, that isn't bad. In one pen for one year.

He'd thought Jackson would let him alone, but now after three weeks Jackson came for him at Marty's. Gus tucked his cue into the rack and walked out to the black-and-white car.

They said nothing until they were back in the courthouse seated across Jackson's scarred desk.

"This time is the bad one," Jackson said, his eyes burying themselves in Gus's. I'll let you tell me before I tell you."

Gus shook his head. "I don't know what you want. I'm still no vag."

Jackson breathed out, almost a sigh. "Last night Kennedy got shot. Old man Kennedy in the filling station out at the junction, next to the tonk. He was still alive when you left him, but he didn't regain consciousness. Somebody goes up for murder." Now he called the name. "Gus Harker. Gus Harker goes up for old man Kennedy."

"I never met him." *Get your eyes out of mine!*

"You never met me either, but you know me."

"Anything point to me?"

"Everything."

"Name it."

You'll play hell naming it, Jackson. I'm Gus Harker and I've only been in one pen for one year. Yeah, name it.

Jackson got his feet up on the desk and his tight law-pants pinched in.

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"You don't want to say a thing?"

"I'm not social. It's illegal?"

"You don't want to say where you were last night? Around 11? Where you get the money that keeps you from being a vag?"

"It's all counterfeit. I make it myself."

Jackson's eyes got back into Gus's and Gus wanted to claw them out. Jackson, the quiet man. Peace officer. He keeps the peace. Peace is a quiet thing.

"Okay, then," he said, "one at a time. Eleven o'clock last night."

"I was out picking bluebonnets. Love that Texas. Love those bluebonnets. See, I'm loyal."

"Anyone who can say you were picking bluebonnets?"

"Me. I can say so. Anyone who can say I wasn't?"

Jackson squirmed loose from the pinch of the law-pants. "We'll find the gun."

"Not my gun."

"Only seventeen dollars was registered on his cash drawer. Hardly worth it, was it?"

"Go find the gun."

"What do you plan to do?"

"I might take your advice. You make a good impression on me. You said pretty soon I'll have a job or I'll go out. That's the way you do it here. You want me to quote you back anything else?"

"You've got a job," Jackson said. "You got a job proving you never met old man Kennedy. It might take you a lifetime to do it."

Gus made his neck quit jerking at his head. "You arresting me?"

"You want me to?"

"No. Unless you're going to stick me with this, don't waste my time. Don't make me get a lawyer and a habeas corpus and bail bond. Not unless you can stick me with this."

The law stroked a thumb across the hollow of his chin. "You were in the state pen at Huntsville for one year. Robbery in Dallas. You drew a three-to-five term, but they let you out so you could go in the Army." He slowed his speech to an easy halt, then quietly took it up. "You took a slug in the knee in Korea. You drag the leg. Partial disability. Seventy bucks a month pension from Uncle Sam and all you can win at snooker."

Gus clamped his hand hard on his thigh. His fingers crept toward the shattered joint. He took his breath in with a gulp.

"And Gus Harker doesn't win at snooker," Jackson said. "Not often."

"You enjoy it," Gus snapped. "Go on, enjoy it."

"You bring a gun back? Maybe a Japanese souvenir to show the girls? Maybe a Russian popper to scare an old man with?"

"I didn't bring anything back but a bum knee. You want to kick it?"

"We might not find the gun for a long time," Jackson said slowly.

Gus didn't get it.

"It might take a week, maybe months."

Jackson got up, walked to the

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door, and went out. With his hat on his head. With Gus sitting there, his neck jerking. Gus sat there for a minute and studied his hands. Crazy, silly things went through his mind. He thought what funny things hands are. He looked at the joints of his fingers and he opened and closed them. Like five little triggers. He looked into his palm at the lifeline. It was a long line, curving down onto the wrist. *What does he mean? What about weeks and months?*

Footsteps came down the hall. Gus curled his hands and dropped them into his lap. His breath was crying in him, so he started breathing through his mouth.

A guy in uniform leaned around the door-frame and smiled a little at him. Like he had been mistaken. Like he was just looking for somebody else. Then he went away.

Gus waited fifteen minutes, looking at his watch fifteen times. He waited another half hour. Then he got up and walked out of the room. Nobody was in the hall. He went down to the front room. The guy at the desk glanced up, then bent back over his magazine.

Okay. Okay, you hick crumbs, with your hick insults, goodbye. He walked outside and stood on the steps. Jackson's car was gone.

Gus went to his room at Peterson's, put his stuff into a zipper bag, and smoked out to the highway. With the zipper bag at his feet he waited out the car that would stop for his thumb. Nobody stopped. Nobody out of thirteen cars. Okay, the fourteenth would do it.

The fourteenth stopped. A black-and-white sheriff's car with Jackson at the wheel. Not in front of Gus, not in back. Beside him.

Gus looked in. Jackson looked out. Two little worlds.

He picked up his bag and walked up fifteen yards. The black-and-white followed him. Right beside him it braked down. Simple? Simple. Who's going to stop for a guy with a squad car parked next to him? People figure maybe it's against the law to hitch or give a hitch.

Gus picked up the bag and walked away again. Jackson got right there next to him and looked out. Two little worlds itching against each other. Wool on wool with the sun burning down.

"You plan to follow me out of the state fifteen yards at a time?" Gus yelled.

"I got no plans."

"How about a lift back to town?" Gus asked.

"No."

"No arrest?"

Jackson didn't move. "Haven't found the gun. May take weeks." His eyes held Gus roasting over a pit. "Even months. Can't tell."

Gus lifted the zipper bag and walked back into town.

Jackson wasn't around when Gus went to the bus station. Gus got the ticket and waited. The front of the bus was marked *Dallas*. Okay, Dallas, you're getting Gus Harker again.

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You're getting a boy who thought it would be better in a hick town after trouble in the city. It wasn't.

The wait was up and he got on the bus. The inside seat next to the window. Next to all the flow of telephone poles and cornstalks and skimming roadbed. Most of the seats filled and the driver passed a handkerchief over his forehead under the cap-beak. He looked at the passengers before he sat down. The motor gunned softly, and the driver glanced at the dock to see if there was a late arrival.

There was. The driver pulled a lever and let Jackson in. The dove-colored shirt came down the aisle, slow-moving. The gray eyes inspected faces. They came to Gus' and Jackson said, "Come with me."

Only if you're going to Dallas, crumb. "How is it?" Gus asked. "Arrest?" He laughed inside himself. Jackson didn't have anything for an arrest. He didn't dare make it that solid. Gus had him. *Okay, you crumb, let's hear it.*

"We got a man-wanted circular," Jackson said. "Out of Denver. You favor him."

"I never saw Denver."

Gray eyes right on him. "If it's a mistake I'll apologize. Just come with me."

Gus got up, all the passengers staring, and followed the law out. The bus gunned up and rolled off. And Dallas was still 156 miles away.

Jackson stopped and looked at Gus. "I can see now in good light you aren't the guy Denver wants." And he walked out on Gus. Just the way he had in the courthouse. Left him standing there.

That was at 4 P.M. and at 7 he was on the train. At 7:05 he was off the train and Jackson was walking away again.

He went into the Palace Café and put in his order. A steak, potatoes and pie. Long hours of hunger were empty inside him, and he was going to fill them with steak, potatoes, and apple pie.

The little blonde with the tarnished bobby pins in her hair brought it in. Gus smelled it for a moment and looked at it, rare the way he liked it. Fork in one hand, knife in the other. Then a small-boned guy made an announcement. The house was closed, he said. Customers murmured. Closed? Who says closed? Why closed?

Why? Didn't they know why? Closed by order of the board of health, the small guy said. The kitchen hadn't passed inspection, so would they please all leave?

Gus closed up the dining room of the Clint Hotel that way, too. And three drugstores. And then he quit trying. The grocery stores were all locked up for the night. Eat at home? No food in his room. He walked down the streets and saw the lights on in houses, but they weren't on for him.

He went to a movie. He drank from the fountain and while he was drinking Jackson walked in and said something to the ticket taker. The guy who had snapped Gus's ticket in two

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and handed him the stub closed the door on the candy display and switched off the light on the popcorn machine. The guy and Jackson watched him go into the dark.

He kept the zipper bag on his lap till his eyes adjusted. Then he went out the back exit. He kept to the dark and made the highway. He hadn't been there a minute when a car stopped. It was painted black-and-white.

Gus dropped the bag, vaulted the barbed fence, and ran across the plowed field. A spotlight enveloped him as he tripped and went down on his face. The bum leg — it was hurting like hell. He lay still as footsteps approached.

"Yeah?" he gasped out. "Yeah?"

"Trespass," Jackson said quietly. Gus staggered to his feet and Jackson herded him back to the road. He didn't ask Jackson for a ride. He limped on in.

Mrs. Peterson told him she had rented his room. All the hotels said they were full. Every time he stopped for a bit, the black-and-white pulled up. And when he hiked all the way to Memorial Park and lay on a bench, Jackson put the searchlight on him and told him to move on.

"I got no place to go," Gus said. "I'm a vag."

"You got money. You're no vag." And Jackson kept the light full on his face.

Gus trudged back to town. It was crazy. What could he do? There wasn't anything to do. Either they haul you in or they leave you out. But he wasn't in or out.

He was limp and the hunger was all through him. So he stayed on his feet until morning. Hour after hour. When he sat on the curb the black-and-white would drive down with the tires scraping the curb and he'd have to stand up and get on his feet again. He'd sit on the sidewalk and the guy who ran the street-washer would spray it along the walk. So he stayed on his feet.

The restaurants didn't open that day. He'd get within a block of a grocery and the black-and-white would open its siren a little and the store would close. With the customers right inside, filling baskets. He'd look through the plate glass at them, and once a kid looked back. The kid looked over Gus's face and kind of smiled, then ran away from the window.

Gus went to the bus station washroom and got his razor out of the zipper bag.

The porter said, "You can't shave here."

Gus lathered up.

"I'll call the law," the porter said.

Gus sliced the beard off his right cheek. The door swung open and Jackson walked in. Gus wiped off the lather and walked out with the zipper bag. One patch of his cheek was clean. The rest of his face felt strange. He was part bearded. He kept walking.

In the afternoon he went into

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Marty's Snooker Club. The men didn't say anything, just holed up against him. The morning before he'd chalked a cue with them and they'd laughed at his cracks and listened to him talk about Korea. Now they bottled up and pulled the cork in after them.

"Listen, guys," he said. All I —"

"What the hell," the rack-man said.

"I'll give you some dough. Just go to a grocery for me."

One of them leaned over the snooker table and took his shot. The cue ball smacked the No. 6 and the 6 rolled into the pocket.

"Will you guys listen!" he yelled.

"Good afternoon, boys."

Gus looked behind him. Jackson. His knees began crumbling, in knots, but they got him out. He walked, feeling the slowness in his body. The hunger. The kid in the grocery. The people on the bus and the train. He wasn't in or out. He didn't belong anywhere.

Then he remembered there was still one thing — the law. Not hick law, but real law.

He was hobbling now. He hobbled to the pay station outside the train depot. The black-and-white saw him go in but went on by. He got the long distance operator.

"Washington, D. C.," he said. "I want Washington, D. C."

"What party, please?" she asked.

He had to think, but it came to him. "Get me the Department of Justice." His throat was dry and his stomach was burning. "Anybody in the Department of Justice."

"Your name, please?"

"Harker," he said. "Gus Harker."

"Hold the line, sir."

Sir. Gus Harker. He held the line. He held the receiver jammed to his ear and heard the switching noises while they went through Dallas and out from there. He heard the Washington operator ask for the number to be repeated, and then it broke off.

"I'm sorry, sir," the operator said. "All the lines to Washington are busy. When I have an open circuit I'll call you."

"I can't wait," he yelled through his dryness. "You're lying. You had Washington."

"I'm sorry."

"Get me Dallas," he yelled. "Get me the U. S. Attorney in Dallas."

"I don't have an open line to Dallas," she said. "I'll call you when —"

He smashed down the receiver. *You crumbs! You lousy crumbs and your whole lousy town. All against me! You got nothing on me. Nothing, not one thing. Get off my back!* And then he was yelling it out loud. "Get off my back!"

He settled down, slumped against the wall of the booth, rubbing his knee. Weeks or months. It wouldn't matter to Jackson. Months or years. He'd had a day and a half, and now he knew what Jackson meant when he said it might take months.

Outside the sun was hot. Inside the booth was like an oven. He didn't know what to do. Not another night

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of it. He couldn't do another night.

He did another night. Standing, walking, hobbling, hungry. With the black-and-white hovering like a vulture. With the law after his hide. And the morning came in hot again, like an angry glaring eye to pin him down.

He made it, one block after another, not going anywhere. All through the day. When the sun was going down a kid came over and held out a piece of paper. Gus blinked his eyes and stared at the kid. A piece of paper. What could he do with a piece of paper?

He finally took it and opened it up. Somebody had written: *I have heard what they are doing to you. If you come to 1139 Maple Street I'll give you something to eat.*

He read it three times. A crank? Some guy who hated Jackson's guts? Who the hell cared? All he hoped was that Maple Street wasn't far. He couldn't ask. Nobody would tell him.

He started walking. His legs and his hunger were stabbing him all over. But if he could get there, he'd be in. This way he wasn't in or out.

He walked on into the residential section. He saw Beula and Harford and Mardon, but he didn't see Maple. Maple Street was burning inside him. He wanted to drop, but he couldn't drop on any street but Maple.

He dragged his bad leg in a wide circle around town over to the other side. A girl passed on a bicycle. He opened his mouth to call her, but didn't. The way this crazy town was acting he couldn't speak to a girl on a bicycle. They'd tear him apart.

Finally he came to Peach Street. Then Elm. Then Oak. Then painted on the curb was Maple Street.

He was in the 700 block. He got to the 900 block and then felt the tightness burning so he couldn't go on. He got across a lawn and turned on a faucet. Fell on his knees in a flower bed and turned on a faucet and drank the water on Maple Street. Then slowly he staggered to his feet.

1139. A white stucco house and a driveway made of two concrete furrows. The porch light was on, but he walked around to the back and knocked on the screen door with his guts knocking in his stomach. An old woman with a wrinkled face let him in. She didn't say anything, just let him in and led him to the kitchen table.

There's always one old lady, Jackson. You can count on one old lady who can't stand it. She hates to kill flies and she feels bad when a rose dies on a bush. There's always one old lady.

She made a plate of food and set it on the kitchen table. She didn't speak. He tried to but couldn't. The hunger was pounding his stomach.

Finally he said, "I sure thank you, ma'am." Then he picked up a fork, but he couldn't touch the food. He just looked at it. His guts were pounding too hard.

"I sure thank you, ma'am," he said again. "You're the only one."

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She looked at him then, her eyes going deep into his. "It's all right," she said. "I know what it means to be alone."

"Lady —" He wanted to tell her, to thank her, but he couldn't. He wasn't alone any more. He was in. One old woman putting life back into a dying man of twenty-four.

"No one knows whether you killed Howard or not. It isn't fair this way."

"Howard?" *What is she talking about? Howard?*

"Howard Kennedy, my husband."

He sat there at the kitchen table — Kennedy's kitchen table — and all of it began pushing him, pushing him. Then he bolted from the table, out through the parlor, out the front door. And Jackson was sitting there under the dim porch light.

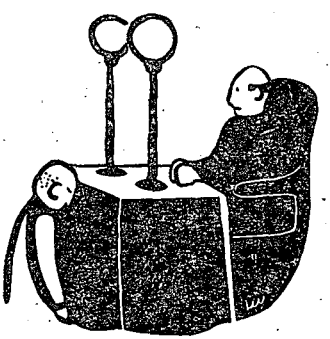
"Jackson!" he yelled.

He looked at the hick law with the gray hair and the tired face. And he looked at the pistol Jackson was holding out to show him.

"No fingerprints," Jackson said. "But there's other ways. We'll keep digging. Maybe months, maybe years . . ."

"Jackson!" His voice cracked into a sob. "I killed him. I killed old man Kennedy!"

Then he was crying . . .



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

TITLE: *Roll Out the Barrel*

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Budapest, Hungary

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The gay (yet sad) tale of Margit, a peasant with the heart of an aristocrat — and the member of the secret police who had his own peculiar method of official interrogation . . .*

MARGIT WAS AN ISLAND LIKE THE rest of us. In the set of complicated currents she kept her shores intact only by loyalty to what was best in herself. She had not much else to be loyal to. She was a Hungarian peasant who had earned her lonely living as a servant in Budapest ever since she was fourteen years old. Social democracy and a husband with a bit of land — those were her desires, political and personal. Towards communism she was dully neutral, for it snatched away with one hand what it gave with the other.

She took pride in her skill, and as much in her employers as they permitted. For the last six months she had worked for a middle-aged consulting engineer, respectable and law-abiding. He seldom laughed, and his ready smile seemed to spring from a natural courtesy rather than any personal interest. He left no doubt, however, that he appreciated her cooking, and that was enough for Margit. She used to day-dream — failing a better subject — that he had asked her to be his wife, though any woman could see that he was dedicated to something, perhaps the memory of a former love, more distant than marriage. The dream never lasted longer than the washing-up of two plates and a coffee cup.

Margit knew very well that she hadn't the beauty to revive a dead heart. All her mirror told her was that she was squat and thick and brown; it couldn't reveal that her eyes were gay and that she moved with light feet and a provocative swing of the

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skirt. That touch of gallantry had been born of the *czardas* danced in the village of her girlhood, and was kept alive by the barrel of excellent wine in her kitchen.

The barrel was a present from her brother, who had inherited the little family vineyard and contrived to hold back enough of the harvest to supply himself and her. The rest went to the state cellars for export. Margit was puzzled that wine should have become so scarce and expensive. In the days before the war a generous employer would no more have thought of reckoning up what was drunk in the kitchen than of counting the potatoes.

So Margit treasured her hundred-liter barrel. She wasn't a heavy drinker. At the moderate rate of a big glass for lunch and another for supper, there was only enough to keep her morale more gay than grim for about two hundred days. The barrel, too, was a symbol. It brought into the worried city a sense of solidarity with her village — a spiritual rather than political class-consciousness. She felt for her hundred liters the welcome that a business woman would give to a hamper of flowers from the garden of her first lover.

Some of her treasure, of course, she had to share; but that, too, was joy. She was enabled to be gracious and to indulge the aristocrat that lived in her peasant heart. So, when she received a visit from the well-dressed gentleman who had recently begun to sit outside the café at the corner, it was hospitality rather than fear which made her draw a jug for him.

She knew what he was. Among the humble there was unspoken alliance for the recognition of secret policemen. The porter of the block, who that very day had been ordered by the well-dressed gentleman to give him a weekly bulletin of information, had dutifully kept the secret, but handed out broad hints to carefully chosen friends.

The policeman in Margit's kitchen was a very superior specimen of the breed — not at all the type which normally collected information from porters. Margit greeted him with the politeness she reserved for a class above her own, and hovered hospitably over him.

"Good wine, this!" exclaimed the gentleman from the cafe at the corner, stretching his legs under the table. "Is your employer rich?"

"My brother sent it me," she replied. "It has nothing to do with the master."

"And what does he drink himself over there?" — the visitor jerked a thumb towards the narrow passage which led, through a faintly delicious atmosphere of spices and onions, to the office and dining-room of Margit's consulting engineer.

"Whatever he can get, sir."

"And plenty of it, eh?"

The visitor, determined to be a democrat, pinched her bottom. Margit's reception of the compliment was cold. She knew from experience that her rotundities were eminently pinch-

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able, and she did not — for example, with the porter — take offense. But the caress of her visitor was incorrect; he made it appear a studied gesture rather than an irresistible temptation.

Margit dropped her best manners and answered him with a rough frankness. That was one good thing about existing conditions: you needn't — if you belonged to the proletariat — bother with ceremony when you didn't feel inclined.

"How can anyone get plenty of it?"

"Complaining of the regime, are you?"

"Listen, I'm a peasant! Better off, worse off? I don't know. Wait and see — that's what we say."

"What about the visitors who come here? Is that what they say?"

"Do you think I've nothing to do, cocky, but crawl up the passage and listen at the door?"

The visitor gave a hoarse chuckle, into which Margit's wine and pleasant, broad accent had injected some sincerity.

"We come from the same district," he exclaimed. "I see that!"

"Every district has some black pigs among the white."

"That's the end, sweetheart," he said — quite tolerantly, but as if the inevitable time had come to exchange good-fellowship for his normal business attitude. "Sit down!"

Resignedly she sat down opposite him at the kitchen table. He represented the limitless power of the state. There was no need for him to explain or threaten, and they both knew it.

He drew from his pocket three photographs of the same man: full face, right profile, and left profile.

"Have you ever seen that one?" he asked her.

"No."

"Have you ever heard the name of Istvan Sarvary?"

"No. Who's he?"

"An enemy of our country, my girl. A revolutionary and warmonger. And at last I'm on his track. Look at those photos, and take your time."

Margit obeyed. The police photographs were clear, glossy prints, upon which every detail could be seen. The subject looked like an unwashed criminal, hollow-cheeked, sneering, and obstinate. She did not recognize the face. Then, in the left profile, she noticed the man's glasses. They were round, old-fashioned, and of heavy tortoise shell, and there was a home-made repair just in front of the left ear, where the rivet or binding had been wrapped in some soft substance to prevent rubbing.

A possible identity for Sarvary at once occurred to her. Yet it was so unlikely that there was no sudden start of recognition in her eyes or mouth for the trained interrogator across the table to leap upon.

"You are interested?" he suggested.

"You told me to take a long look."

"And what do you see?"

—What she saw in the eye of the mind was a drawer in the consulting engineer's dressing-table, and a pair of old glasses with the left bar wrapped round by a neatly sewn strip of wash

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leather. Could they be the same glasses? Was it possible for a haggard, clean-shaven man with dark, wavy hair to turn into her employer with his well-rounded cheeks, his straight white hair greased firmly back, and his white luxuriant mustache which looked as if it had been over his mouth for the last 30 years? Then there was his nose. The man in the photograph had a strong, fleshy nose, quite ordinary. Her employer had a Roman nose with a marked and distinguished bump on its bridge. The shape of it, she remembered — almost with a giggle — seemed to change in hot weather. No, of course it was unthinkable. Her kind master could not be a man wanted by the police, a barbarian trying to bring about another war.

"I've seen someone like him," she said at last.

She couldn't tell how much her face had given away. Something, yes. The keen peasant game of buying and selling was in her blood. She knew, from the parallel of the market-place, that her hesitation had been too long and that she must explain it.

"Who?"

"The new notary of our village."

"They have a queer breed in your village," he remarked contemptuously. "Stop fooling, girl! When did this man come to see your employer?"

"Never."

"Then what was he doing — the person whom you thought the photograph resembled?"

"Our notary? He makes too much money at home to come to Budapest."

The visitor rose from the table and brutally dominated her eyes.

"If you hurt me, I'll scream," she threatened. "They know I'm respectable here."

"Hurt you? My dear, we don't do that sort of thing. I'm just going to give you time to remember."

The gentleman from the corner café strolled impassively across the kitchen and turned on the tap of the barrel. The thin, fast stream of wine hit the tiles with a neat plash.

Margit shrieked, and leaped for the tap rather than for him. At once she made brutal contact with her chair again, arms bruised, bewildered by the dexterity with which she had been flung back to place.

"We like wine in our district, don't we?" he said. "Barrel full?"

"Yes. Yes, sir," she begged. "Nearly full."

"Then it will take about ten minutes to empty it. Plenty of time to talk."

The purple and pink foam that had jumped from the kitchen tiles subsided, and the lake of wine deepened and spread.

"Please, sir! Please!"

"But I shall be delighted to turn it off when you've told the truth. A pity for such good wine to be wasted! I should say your brother's is a rather stony soil facing south," he replied, talking with an exasperating slowness.

"It didn't remind me of the notary. I swear it," she sobbed, the big tears ricocheting off her apron into wine.

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"Ah? Of whom then?"

"Nobody. I was impertinent. I've never seen the face before."

"And the name Istvan Sarvary? Have you never heard it? Or overheard it, perhaps? Think now! That's a generous tap you have there."

"No, never! Never, sir! I've never heard it."

The words were loud and incoherent with grief. The lake of wine found out an imperceptible slope and began to run towards the passage. At the door it deepened to a quarter of an inch, and the color changed from a pink transparency to black with red reflections.

"He might have come here without your knowing it?"

"Yes, yes, of course he might," she answered eagerly.

"You're not sure that you haven't seen him, then?"

"No. How could I be sure?"

"Then we have only to take a little step further. Look! I'm just going to shut off the tap. Tell me when it was he might have come here — that's all I want to know."

Margit was utterly muddled. What he invited her to say sounded so reasonable. Why on earth was she letting her wine run away when she had only to tell him a date, a movement, her crazy suspicion, anything? Yet — she didn't tell lies. She opened her mouth and nothing would come. All the inhibitions of the Christian Europe that had made her stood in the way. Had she been asked outright whether her employer could be Istvan Sarvary she might have answered that at least she had wondered. Might have. But there again, standing at the gate, was all the loyalty of a feudal system that had vanished and left nothing but its good.

"I can't tell you. I don't know."

The interrogator kept the barrel running.

"Won't, little one, not can't! Won't, you mean."

She heard the front door open and shut as her employer came home.

"Good heavens, what's all this?" he exclaimed.

He bounded up to the passage on the track of the wine, and caught the visitor with his hand still on the tap.

"Margit, your wine! What's all this?"

Margit's face was bedabbled with tears. The gentleman looked confused and guilty.

"Tap leaking?" the consulting engineer asked.

"He turned it on," she sobbed.

"Friend of yours?"

"No, no, no!"

"Well, then — ah. I think I understand! But, my dear sir, if you had anything to ask, why didn't you come to see me? I know everyone in the building and my reputation is sound, I hope. No good telling you I'm a Communist — too old, for one thing. But what I always say is, they're doing fine work for Hungary. Example to all Europe, eh? Loyal to Russia, but our communism, not theirs. We're both patriots, aren't we? Well, there's the bond. Now you put me through the hoops in any way you like."

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Her master was so friendly and natural that Margit at once put out of mind that imagined identity. After all, there was more than one pair of mended spectacles in the world. And then his nose! You couldn't alter a nose that God had made.

"What do *you* know of Istvan Sarvary?" the visitor shot straight at him.

"Sarvary? Why, I thought he was abroad. Don't tell me the swine has managed to get back to Budapest!"

"He was a friend of yours, was he?"

"No, he wasn't. Far from it! But you've come to the right shop, my dear sir. I'll answer all your questions. We can't have men like Istvan Sarvary about. Margit, there's nothing to drink in the house. May we perhaps borrow what's left in the barrel? I'll make it up to you. Yes, we'll try to get something as good as yours."

"You're generous," the gentleman sneered suspiciously.

"You think so? I'll tell you how it is. I don't want the State to show pity. Try the dogs, shoot them, exile them, put them to work! They're expendable, aren't they? But a little woman like this — well, when she gets in the way, the State can't help it and mustn't show pity. Never! But chaps like you and me are free to do what we can. That's what I say."

Margit didn't agree at all with this view of the State, but she assumed it was politics and over her head. If a man with a good heart accepted cruelty, it meant nothing and was just words.

The man from the corner café took Margit's employer a little aside, and warned him of something in a low voice.

"She? Oh, I don't think she could have seen him. But you never know. Well, if there's anything at all, you'll get it out of her. Better methods than wine taps, eh? Now let's sit down. It must be seldom that you get a real hot tip straight from the horse's mouth and a jug of first-class stuff to go with it. If you don't mind my saying so, I've watched the scent of that wine making you more human every minute."

The visitor grinned, then pulled himself together with military solemnity and declared that he had no time for gossip.

"This gossip is going to be worth your while, captain. I'll tell you for a start one man whom Sarvary is likely to be seeing — his wife's cousin. You didn't know that, did you? And you're in charge of the investigation."

"Not yet," the visitor admitted, "but I shall be. It's every man for himself in the police, and I like to wait for the best minute to put in my report. Now you help me, and I won't forget you. What would you say if I told you I'm on to a connection between Sarvary and this very house?"

"Your very good health!" exclaimed the consulting engineer, raising his glass. "Is that so? Well, well, now let me see! First of all I'll fix up my Margit, and then I'm with you. I can't have such a cook upset," he

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explained. "You can't expect a little artist to work without a drink in her heart. Look here, sweetheart, here's an address! You go there and tell them to deliver another barrel of red this evening. And you must need a rest after all this. Take the afternoon off if you want to."

He scribbled a note and gave it to Margit. She had never seen her employer so cordial. She was hurt that he had never smiled at her as genuinely as he was smiling at this filthy police agent from the corner café, and hurt, too, even if she were to be compensated, that the pair of them should calmly sit down and drink up the rest of her wine. She said to herself that it was unfeeling. Just unfeeling, that was all. Not even enough to excuse a toss of the head.

"But I can't stop long," the visitor protested. "I don't want to take my eyes off this street."

"Splendid! Splendid! It's good to know that our safety is in your hands. But why not telephone one of your sergeants and tell him to check all movements in and out of this house in your absence? A good chance to see whether he knows his job! You can watch him through the curtains."

Margit put her kerchief over her head and went out, leaving the two to their sly grins and good-fellowship. It was just like men, she thought, to sit down and souse on somebody else's wine and pretend they were catching enemies of the State. It didn't make any difference — townee or peasant, consulting engineer or Communist, they were all the same. Wine and pinching people where people were roundest and sacrificing the helpless.

She delivered her employer's note at the address he had given her. It was a cheerless, obscure, commercial office without the heartening smell of liquor or the noisy group of customers welcome to try out a great many more vintages than they ever meant to buy. Well, nothing was sold any longer as, traditionally, it ought to be sold.

She called on a friend who might have comforted her, but wasn't in. Boozing, too, probably. Then she idled away the afternoon in public gardens and at a public meeting. After two hours she went home. It was all very well to tell her to take the afternoon off, but who would get the supper, she would like to know.

Her employer was asleep. The gentleman from the corner café had gone. Neither of them had made any attempt to mop up the lake of wine and its meandering streams, so she set to work on the kitchen. She forced herself (for she was economical) to dip a fine white cloth in the deepest pool and to squeeze it into a glass in case the wine should be still drinkable and worth preserving. It certainly wasn't. She was ashamed and determined to clean her floor much more thoroughly than usual, especially after chopping meat.

Then three hefty men brought up her new barrel. They didn't talk much, and they wouldn't accept a drink. They weren't at all like the

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deliverymen she used to know. The three rolled away the old barrel down the passage. She wondered what wood her brother was using for staves. But perhaps the barrel seemed so heavy because the delivery men didn't get enough to eat. That must be it. In these days they made criminals into policemen and boys of good family into porters.

After that, all the tides of complication receded from her little personal island. There was a flurry of nervousness when some police came to inquire about the gentleman from the corner café, who, it seemed, had disappeared. Her kind employer told her not to be frightened of them but to describe her interrogation as it had happened.

"The only thing I shouldn't say if I were you, Margit," he warned her, "is that the man stayed on a little here after he telephoned his sergeant that he had gone. We don't want him to make trouble for us when he turns up again, do we?"

So Margit said nothing at all of that, and the police found the incident of the wine tap so comic that they paid very little attention to her. She disapproved of their behavior. It was typically masculine and insensitive. But — taking the rough with the smooth, as she put it — she couldn't complain. The new barrel of wine did not carry in it the love of a brother, but at least she would be able to taste, whenever she sat down to her meals, the remarkable generosity of her master.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **THOMAS WALSH**

TITLE: ***Will You Always Be Helping Me?***

TYPE: Human Interest Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Donovan, hotel dick

LOCALE: A city in Maryland, near Philadelphia

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *House detective Donovan's voice made him seem tough, but Miss 1449 was no professional deadbeat . . . and her eyes were dark and starry.*

IT TOOK ONLY TWO OR THREE MINutes for Donovan to discover that Miss 1449 had her stuff pretty well cleaned out. The fur coat was gone — hocked, of course, Donovan knew — and most of her other things had vanished with it; there was left one dress, a light fall coat, a pair of brown shoes well worn at the heels, some underwear, a couple of nightgowns, and two empty traveling bags. After giving a morose upward stare to the single pair of stockings hanging from the shower curtain rail in the bathroom Donovan growled and shook his head. It was one of the times he became overwhelmingly convinced that a hotel dick had the lousiest job in the world.

She was, he thought, no professional deadbeat; Miss 1449 had never used her head. For the fur coat had at least given her a front and when, in a cold November, she suddenly stopped wearing it you knew two things: Miss 1449 had hocked it, so Miss 1449 was broke.

Donovan sighed — of course he'd have to tell Kelleher how this looked — and rolled an unlit cigarette around between his lips. Before he could touch a match to it the door in back of him opened and Miss 1449 came in.

She didn't scream when she saw him standing by her bed, but for a breath, stiffening slightly, she remained perfectly still — a pause just long enough to let Donovan shut off whatever action she might have taken by growling at her in a gruff voice.

© 1940 by Thomas Walsh, originally titled "Boy From Home," in the "Woman's Home Companion"

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"I'm Donovan, lady — the house detective. You don't have to be scared."

She got some recognition into her eyes while he was silently cursing the fool at the desk who should have spotted her coming in and phone up to let him know. Donovan adopted toughness by lowering his lids slightly and making his voice cold and sharp, while she put her hat on the dresser and placed a paper bag beside it.

He said, "You owe the Maryland House eighty-two dollars and sixty cents, lady. When you didn't pay up this morning like you said you would, Mr. Kelleher told me to come up here and look around. You know we got the right to hold whatever baggage there is if you can't settle your bill."

"I suppose you have," Miss 1449 said. She wasn't argumentative or indignant about it like some. Sitting down in the chair under the lamp she added, quietly enough, "I'm afraid there isn't very much of my stuff left to hold now."

"Not eighty-two dollars' worth," Donovan told her toughly.

She was a small dark girl with brown hair parted in the middle. The tailored suit she had on looked crisp on her slender body, severely businesslike, but not unattractive. Donovan had noticed that she had a level pair of eyes and an erect way of carrying her head; he was considerably relieved that those things didn't fail her even now. Apparently she wasn't the bawling type.

He sat down on the bed looking across at the paper bag she had set on the dresser by her hat. Buns, Donovan thought; buns were always cheap and filling. Lighting his cigarette and squinting at her through the match flame he asked in that hardboiled voice: "How did you get into this?"

She gave him a quick outline. Her name was Marjorie Thorne. She'd come from a small town in Indiana, had worked for two years for a lawyer in Philadelphia; had lost her job with the lawyer when the firm dissolved. Through a friend she had heard of a job down here but when she came down it had already been filled. Still she had a little money saved — four hundred dollars — and it had seemed that she might find a job here as well as anywhere else. So she had stayed on; and the first Saturday she'd gone to a bargain sale in one of the big stores. She felt no one touch her pocketbook; it must have been much later when she discovered it was hanging open on her arm. All the money was gone — all except some change.

"How about getting money from home?" Donovan asked. "Any chance of that?"

Hopelessly Miss 1449 answered, "I'm afraid there isn't."

He lectured her in a tone he tried to make stinging and scornful. That was the trouble with girls like her, he said; they never thought about the people they got in bad by acting the way they did. Kelleher, the manager, and he — they were the ones that would be left holding the bag.

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Twisting her fingers together in her lap, Miss 1449 whispered she was sorry, never losing the desperately strained white smile that would not look directly into his face.

Over her, properly righteous, Donovan rubbed his red hair with the palm of one hand.

"I guess that fixes it all up," he said. "You haven't got any money and you can't pay your bill; but if you're sorry, why that takes care of everything."

The girl lowered her head still more from his eyes. Through the window behind her, in the ice-blue November dusk, Donovan saw lights winking on in the tall buildings all around — comfortable lights, looking warm and moneyed and assured. He stared down at her with his eyes uneasy. No family at all? Her head shook again. That was fine, Donovan said; coming to the Maryland House when she was in a spot like that was using her head all right. Walking up and down, he stopped by the dresser and hefted the paper bag. Buns of course. That all she had to eat?

"Oh —" Looking up there for the first time, Miss 1449 flushed a little. "I wasn't very hungry tonight. I didn't feel like —"

"Like roast turkey or duck," Donovan said. He looked very disgusted with her.

He stared down at the straight part in her hair and cleared his throat. He was aware that he should let Kelleher handle this, that he should just tell her to get her hat and come on downstairs with him, because there wasn't a thing in the world he could do for her.

But Donovan was shamefacedly conscious that he couldn't act on it. November, pretty cold, a little change in her purse, no place to go — what could he do? Turn her out — sure. But if he wanted to sleep tonight —

"Look," he said, making every third or fourth word louder than the others just to keep the appearance of toughness about him and not let her imagine he was getting soft. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'll say downstairs I read a letter you left lying around — from an uncle. I'll tell Kelleher he says he's going to send you some money on the fifteenth — that's Saturday. Saturday you just walk out of here and don't come back. He'll take a chance on waiting till then because of the money you owe already. Understand that?"

When she started to speak Donovan growled, "Shut up." He didn't want to talk any more about it; he knew he was being silly the way it was. "I'll give you that time to look around and get settled some place. Saturday, remember. After that you're on your own. Another thing —" His eyes had noticed the paper bag on the dresser again. Those buns! "I'm eating out at 6. You could come along if you wanted."

She got out of her chair — no higher than his shoulder, Donovan thought, her face pale from strain, or from living on buns all week.

"Oh, no," Miss 1449 said. Her

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voice was pretty shaky then. "I couldn't do that. I —"

Donovan glowered at her. "It's an invitation, understand — not a proposition. Six in the drugstore downstairs. You be there or I'll come up after you."

In his own tiny room under the roof he ran a comb through his hair and straightened his tie. He had a lean face, hot-looking blue eyes, a thin sharp nose, a wide mouth; all his life he had got sore easily and at a lot of things. Just now he was sore mostly at himself but he was sore at Miss 1449, too. Going down in the elevator he could feel his anger bubbling and fizzing like seltzer poured into a glass, so that at 6 when she appeared timidly in the drugstore entrance he took her arm without a word and led her off.

In a restaurant around the corner he ordered a planked steak for two. In the course of events he discovered that she did have one relative. An uncle. Very well off too, running an auto agency, back in Cohane, Indiana. Years ago, when her mother had been very ill and she was still in school, he would not help them. Now she would never ask again.

"You haven't any friends here at all?"

Well — she'd heard there was a boy here who had gone to school with her back in Cohane, Indiana. But she'd never thought of looking him up because she'd never liked him much. What could he do for her? It was Donovan who pointed out that it couldn't hurt to get in touch with him; he might be able to find her a job. And it was Donovan too who insisted that she phone this Arthur Ellison in the morning. Two days later that was the thing he could not forget . . .

Back at the hotel her hand rested small and cool in his. If, she said, there were only some other word than thanks.

The next afternoon it developed that Arthur Ellison had been delighted to hear from her and was coming that night to take her to dinner. Fine, Donovan thought — a two-buck meal saved for him. But somehow that wasn't a complete satisfaction.

He managed to be around that evening when they got back to the Maryland House. An oily guy, Donovan thought. Arthur Ellison held on to her hand for quite a while before she got into the elevator. Then he remained where he was — a young man, tall, palely fat, with a heavy mouth and black eyes as lusterless as soot. For five minutes he stood there very still, very absorbed, the way a man would when he turned over something important in his mind.

Donovan put him down as a guy he didn't like. Later one thought came back to him: What had he been figuring out there?

Thursday — his day off — Donovan took Miss 1449 to lunch. They stopped on the way at an out-of-town

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newspaper stand because she wanted to get a copy of the *Cohane Inquirer*, but it was all sold out; a big guy had bought them all that morning. Marjorie Thorne asked to have one saved for her tomorrow. She hadn't, she explained to Donovan, seen one since she left Philadelphia three weeks ago. In the windy November sunshine the *Cohane Inquirer* had never been less important. In his old car Donovan took her to all the places he thought a girl like her would want to see: the museum and the art gallery, the big new library, city hall, the girls' college way out in the suburbs. There was nothing important about the day. It would have been hard to say just why Donovan knew he would never forget any of it.

She told him how very nice Arthur Ellison had been; that evening he had insisted that she dine with him again. Tomorrow morning he was calling for her at the hotel, because by then he'd have arranged an interview with his friend who worked in a law office and he was going to take her over there himself. He even — she flushed there and smiled in rather a troubled fashion at Donovan. Last night he had even proposed to her.

Donovan's jaws tightened, relaxing only when she said she took that as a joke. That was the only way she could take it — the first time she'd seen him, after seven or eight years! She supposed he was lonely in the city, and an old friend, someone from Cohane. . . . Of course she'd never dream of it.

Yeah, Donovan said. He hoped she wouldn't. But all night he rather worried about it.

The next day he spent around the entrance because he wanted to see her and discover how she had made out about that job. And that day she didn't come back to the Maryland House at all — not at 2, or at 4, or at 6. At 10 that night when he called her room, thinking somehow he had missed her, there wasn't any answer.

Then Donovan began to be anxious about her. Coming away from the switchboard, he met Kelleher at the cigar stand, talking to the girl behind the counter — Kelleher in a snapping, grouchy mood.

"What's this about 1449?" Kelleher asked, looking at him angrily from under his gray brows. "Aren't we paying you to keep us up on stuff like that, Donovan? Only for the girl here I'd never have known it. One thing I'll tell her — married or not she'll pay her bill before she moves out of here."

"What about her?"

Grunting at him sourly, Kelleher held out a copy of the morning paper, folded over to the last sheet. Halfway down there was a list of marriage licenses issued the day before: Ellison, Arthur, 26, 3132 Norega Avenue; Thorne, Marjorie, 24, Maryland House.

When he looked up Kelleher was gone. Broke, Donovan thought, a sickness settling in him, out of work, up against it; and this old town friend saying he loved her and wanted to

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take care of her. It wasn't too hard to understand.

And yet Donovan couldn't believe it. She wouldn't have laughed at Arthur Ellison yesterday if she had meant to marry him. Not a girl as nice as Miss 1449. She'd been gone all day. Not a word, not a call. Where, Donovan thought? With the old friend from Cohane she had already refused but who had taken out a license anyway?

He was uneasy at the thought. His fear was crystallized by a scene he had almost forgotten — the newspaper stand yesterday, the *Cohane Inquirers* all gone, the clerk telling them of the big guy who had bought them up — a big guy who might be Arthur Ellison. Why would Arthur Ellison buy them up? *Because there was something inside he did not want her to read?*

A soft oppressive weight of dread hung dead on Donovan's heart. Without waiting to get his hat or coat he hurried to the newsstand they had visited the day before.

The clerk there, remembering him, pulled out the paper he'd saved for the lady. Only gave the big guy two that morning, he told Donovan; said two was all he had.

"Thanks," Donovan said. His voice was dry. What did this big guy look like?

Oh — the clerk considered. Fat. Kind of pale. Funny eyes. Donovan nodded. Going off a few steps, he opened the *Cohane Inquirer.* What was in here that Arthur Ellison had not wanted her to see? Nothing on the first page, the second, the third. On the fourth, in a three-column spread of small social items, he saw Miss 1449's name.

"Miss Marjorie Thorne, formerly of this town and until last month known to be employed in Philadelphia, is still being diligently sought as we go to press. Since the passing three weeks ago of her uncle, Mr. Fred Sibley, no information as to her whereabouts has been uncovered. Mr. Sibley's only living kin and the sole beneficiary under his will —"

Donovan had it then; as soon as he read those words everything dropped into place. Arthur Ellison knew about the will; Miss 1449 didn't. In Philadelphia she had left no forwarding address and since she had been here she had written to no friend back in Cohane; therefore, no one in Cohane knew where she was. No one but Arthur Ellison who bought the Cohane papers. When Miss 1449 would not marry him he had taken out a marriage license anyway. With another girl, someone he bribed. Under Marjorie Thorne's name he might have married her.

If he had, Donovan thought, cold sweat dampening his palms, Miss 1449 was going to die tonight, in some quiet way, accidental, well thought out. In an instant Donovan was as sure of that as he was of his name; Miss 1449 would have to die, since she said she wouldn't marry him — to leave a grieving widower. A widower with all the proper papers in his pocket, so that when the funeral was over back

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in Cohane the lawyers would come and tell him about the estate he would pretend he never knew existed. Her uncle had died? Left her money? No, he had not known it.

In one jagged flash it became that exact and detailed in Donovan's mind. Before he had figured out what to do he found himself running for a cab, one line of print, from the paper Kelleher had shown him, vivid in his mind. Ellison, Arthur, 26, 3132 Norega Avenue . . .

He found out Arthur Ellison had left there, moved his things very early that morning. No, the landlady said, she had no idea where he could be found now.

Where? Donovan thought. In what shadowed room might Miss 1449's hands reach out for Donovan's, might her voice be crying his name? It seemed he could hear that now — thin with distance, remote and terrified. Donovan, Donovan — help me, Donovan. Help me!

The heavy-faced man riding south in his coupé on the Philadelphia Pike looked at the clock on the dashboard and saw that it was five past one. Getting on to two then, when he'd be in — a good time. Streets empty, houses dark. No one at all to see him. Even the girl asleep. Five minutes at the apartment and it would all be over.

He felt that he wasn't nervous at all, but instead very cool and collected. It all had turned out exactly as he had wanted it — the girl alone in the apartment, sleeping soundly, unaware of the marriage license listed that morning in the paper in her name and his. She hadn't seen that — he had indeed taken good care she shouldn't by keeping her with him all that day — and so she would suspect nothing. Why should she, when she did not even know her uncle was dead?

To get her to the apartment all he had had to say was that his sister Zelda was coming in from Cohane, due by car in the early morning at the furnished apartment he had taken for her. And he couldn't stay there to meet her, he must go to Philadelphia tonight on business. His sister then, who had known Marjorie Thorne back in Indiana, ringing the bell in the morning and no one there to greet her, to explain how he could not be there. He knew no tenants; the landlady would be away.

Of course Marjorie Thorne had offered, before he even asked her, to stay there tonight if he wanted her to. It would be a slight repayment for all the trouble he had gone to that day for her. She remembered Zelda well; she'd let her in, explain why Arthur was not there.

The apartment was all right. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ellison — that's how he had listed it with the landlady. She had never seen the girl. Rented the place himself last night; taken the girl there tonight, at 10:00, just enough time to spare to get his train to Philadelphia. The landlady's apartment had been dark then — an old woman, asleep early. She would have

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no chance to talk to the girl before the morning. And by then —

He pursed his heavy mouth. By then everything would be all right. Only the other girl, that Agnes Barclay. . . . Still, if she never found out what happened to Marjorie Thorne, how could she cause trouble? Sick of the city she was, sick of the dime-a-dance place where he'd met her some weeks ago; for a ticket back to Alabama and a hundred dollars she had not asked questions. Yesterday afternoon she had gone with him for the license; an hour later, as Marjorie Thorne, she had married him in a little suburban parsonage.

The minister had not questioned it, nor the minister's two friends whom he had called in as witnesses. Why should they? Why should anyone? The girl was old Sibley's only kin. So there'd be no disappointed relatives to grow ugly about her marriage and her sudden death. The lawyers might wonder a bit, but there would be nothing definite to lead them on. Agnes Barclay was dark and small, not very different in size from Marjorie Thorne; from a photograph, the minister, if he were ever asked, would hesitate to be too positive.

They never could prove anything against him except through Agnes Barclay. And he had bought her ticket for tonight's train and in the morning she'd be back in Alabama, not knowing what had happened here, never getting any Maryland papers. For at first the death would seem an accident — a line or two on an inside page. And if by some chance Agnes Barclay found out what had happened the night she started home, why then he would tell her she was in it as deep as he.

Everything, then, was in order. He had left for Philadelphia tonight on the 10:45. He could prove that; ask them how he could possibly get back the same night when no more trains ran until 6:00 the next morning?

They did not know about the car; he would put it in dead storage tomorrow, using the name he had bought it with. They would surmise that he might have used a car — Philadelphia and Maryland, not far apart. But they could not prove it. The men who rented cars could only shake their heads. No car to anyone like that. Nope!

So he thought he had been clever to buy the car and to register at that hotel in Philadelphia. He would get back there tomorrow in time to have breakfast and to muss the bed; who could swear that he had ever left it?

No, everything was fine; in all of it he could see no flaw. In the city now he parked the car two blocks away from the apartment, in a patch of shadow by the park.

How quiet the streets, how empty! His shadow, enormous, preceded him. In the deep silence a sudden feeling of tremendous pride surged up in him. Against the dark-windowed houses he saw himself a solitary figure of unconquerable power.

He threw out his arms in a grotesque and shadowy sweep, a giant in

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a world of dwarfs. Then he saw the apartment house before him with no lights showing in any of the windows. All asleep! His key, the street door opened, the halls inside quiet and empty. Two flights up; the carpet smothered all sound. Number seven. Careful now. If she heard —

He worked the lock back softly, with the greatest of patience, cunningly, a match breadth at a time. No rasp, no creak, no sound. Inside, the door closed quietly behind him. His eyes saw in the darkness the dim bulk of chair and table, the upright dark rectangle of the bedroom door.

And then the white shape of the bed, the darkness of her hair against the pillow. And somewhere below — a sound to smash the stillness — the ringing of a bell. A telephone; frozen against the wall, he recognized that at once. No sound after it, silence again. The call answered, whoever received it had gone back to sleep. No need for alarm.

Curtains fluttered by the window. Watching her, he forced the sash down. One faint rasp. She stirred. Quiet then, Arthur Ellison. The heater cord in his hand. How many apartments had he looked at before he found one that had a gas heater? Couldn't ask for one, of course — that would be remembered afterward. Couldn't even notice it when he saw one here. The rubber cord well worn, a tiny bit loose at the top — saw at once it was exactly what he wanted. Gone to sleep with it on, they'd think in the morning. Yanked it slightly perhaps, while arranging it. Too bad. A young girl just married.

His fingers touched the nozzle; a hiss came, not loud. She did not move again. Then the bedroom door closed after him quietly. A pause in the corridor — but no sound, no sound.

And inside, behind the closed bedroom door, a hiss, steady but never enough to rouse — just a thickening in the air, insensible in sleep. The coupé now, he thought, and the ride back to Philadelphia. Breakfast early in the hotel coffee room as if he'd just come down. Fine — everything fine!

The downstairs hall as empty as before. Still he moved quickly across the entry, down the stoop. A car racing in the silence, tires whining as it took this corner — drunks late from a party. Why should they notice him?

The car stopping at the curb by him. He walked faster, slightly breathless. Two men coming. One of them was stocky and red-haired. He grabbed Arthur Ellison's arm, punched him hard in the face. *Damn you — where have you got her?*

He took Arthur Ellison's keys and ran up the steps.

"Police," Arthur Ellison said to the second man who had remained with him, "I'm going to call the police. You can't attack —"

The other man looked at him with small hard eyes. "I'm police, brother — I'm all the police you're going to want."

"Police?" Arthur Ellison whispered. The words rustled like dry paper in his throat.

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Tears began to glisten on his pale fat cheeks. He tried to recapture the feeling he had had walking here from the car. It was gone. The policeman's fingers hurt his arm — clamped in the flesh, tightly, firmly, as if they were never going to let him go.

"How did I find you?" Donovan repeated after her in Room 1449 at the Maryland House, with morning sunlight bright on the breakfast tray. "I began by figuring — well, you wouldn't go to a hotel with him. If I was right I knew he had to have the setup perfect so that nobody was gonna suspect anything afterward, so that you were all set as Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ellison. If he couldn't take you to a hotel, where could he take you?

"He was living at a boarding house; but he'd moved that morning early. So I knew he had some place to take you — some place private and quiet. What fits that? A furnished apartment was all I could think of. And where does anybody look for one? In the newspaper. So I got all the afternoon papers for day before yesterday — if he had the place to go to early in the morning he must have found it the night before — and began to call the numbers listed in the ads. After a couple of hours I hit the right one. Then I came out in a squad car with a cop from headquarters. I guess we got there only a minute or so after he turned on the gas."

"Will you always be helping me, Donovan?" Miss 1449 said. Her voice was soft and her eyes all dark and starry. "Why were you worried when I didn't come home yesterday? Why did you bother about me so much?"

Why, Donovan thought? He lit himself a cigarette and muttered that well, he just wondered where she was. Staying out like that. He couldn't think of anything else to add. Because she was rich now. If he said anything she'd think — There was one safe question: when was she going back to Cohane?

"When?" She took some coffee, dark eyes watching him over the cup brim. "Very soon, I'm afraid. When I left, Donovan, I said I'd never come back — not until I had a husband to show off. But now I suppose —"

Donovan got off a grin, slightly stiff. He said he guessed there'd be enough guys around now.

"Donovan," Miss 1449 said. Her voice was angry but her expression wasn't. "Will I actually have to say it for you, Donovan? Will I? Because I could never, never, never do that!"

Donovan tried to show her how it was, that he didn't have much of a job, that he certainly wasn't any kind of guy to show off, that he couldn't ask her to marry him now she had money because then she'd think —

"What?" Miss 1449 asked softly. "That you loved me?"

So in the end it wasn't any use. What could he do? Donovan took her in his arms and Donovan kissed her; and she knew then, if Donovan didn't, that she wouldn't have to go back to Cohane, Indiana, alone.

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

THE MAN WITH TWO WIVES *by PATRICK QUENTIN* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.75)	". . . irony and compassion and the subtle development of character . . . pat explanation. . . ." (H-M)	"Adroitly plotted and expertly written." (FP)
STRANGER IN TOWN *by BRETT HALLIDAY* (TORQUIL-DODD, MEAD, $2.75)	". . . usual Shayne adventures . . . sound plot, perhaps one of Halliday's best." (LGO)	"Amnesia a factor . . . pace variable. The mixture as before." (SC)
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AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key at bottom gives sources.

SHOOT A SITTING DUCK *by DAVID ALEXANDER* (RANDOM, $2.75)	". . . the best, by some margin, of David Alexander's novels to date." (AB)	"Pace grows fast as wad of dough is stashed in little theatre . . . His best yet." (SC)
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LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*
FP: *Fay Profilet in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*
DQ: *Dorothy Quick in the Easthampton (N. Y.) Star*
AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ARTHUR GORDON**

TITLE: ***The Deadly Cycle***

TYPE: Bedtime Story

CHARACTERS: George and Helen Carver

LOCALE: Merrivale, U. S. A.

TIME: New Year's Eve

COMMENTS: *About a young husband and wife who quarreled and of the dream-fair in Hypotenuse Square . . . by the talented author of the Literary Guild selection,* REPRISAL.

IN LESS THAN TEN YEARS THE WHOLE huge development had sprung out of the flat treeless plain. There it stood, functional and efficient, acre after acre of small neat houses under the bristling forest of television aerials. Merrivale, it was called.

No two dwellings were exactly alike, but no two were very different. The same could have been said of their inhabitants. In fact, it *was* said, quite frequently. Merrivale tax-payers were well aware that they had the same problems, the same diversions, the same interests. Since they had more or less the same incomes, they also dressed more or less alike. They drove similar cars, ate similar foods, read similar newspapers. So they tended to think alike. "It's a wonder," said George Carver disgustedly on more than one occasion, "that we don't dream alike!"

There was one area, though, where a geographic accident — or possibly the whim of some surveyor — had made a difference. The development was perfectly rectangular except at the southeastern extremity. Here the whole corner had been sheared off as if with a gigantic knife, and for one brief and exciting distance the houses ran at an angle to all the rest. These houses, naturally, were in great demand, especially since they faced a large open field. Since they formed the longest leg of a right-angled triangle they came to be known, with the wry humor that prevailed in the area, as the "hypotenuse houses."

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George and Helen Carver did not live in a hypotenuse house, although they wished they did. They lived close by, on the northern edge of the triangle. A typical Merrivale couple: George tallish and dark and moderately athletic; Helen a fairly natural blonde, vivacious and gay and sometimes very pretty. Married two years, no children so far, occasional churchgoers, occasional drinkers on social occasions, ardent televiewers, drivers of a four-year-old car, owners of a three-year-old dog named Rags, the theory being that some day he might lead them to riches.

As yet, that day had not dawned. George had a good-enough job as draftsman at the aircraft factory eight miles away. Helen worked part time at the shopping center. They felt restless and impatient at times, but so did everybody else in Merrivale. They were not unhappy. They were still in love. Being young and hot-tempered they quarreled occasionally, and once or twice a year had a real fight. The worst fight they ever had began at five minutes past midnight on New Year's Eve or, if you must be precise about it, New Year's Day.

It began then, and it got worse. Got so bad, in fact, that by 1 o'clock they had left the dance at the big Merrivale Community Center, had driven home in icy silence, and were now in their bedroom snarling at each other like two wild animals. The cause? A New Year's kiss given to Helen by a stranger. A kiss that in George's opinion (sharpened by several highballs) had lasted a good deal too long. A kiss that had set in motion the deadly cycle: jealousy and accusation, denial and recrimination, the demand for complete possession and the resentment of that demand, anger barbing the words, frustration adding the poison, on and on, cut and thrust and jab, right through the pitiful thin armor of vanity until Helen in tears and fury had shouted, "Tomorrow! Tomorrow, so help me, I'll leave you, George Carver!"

And he had answered, equally furious, "Can't you make it tonight?"

Now he lay rigid on his side of the bed in the darkened room, listening to Helen's choked breathing, sustaining his rage by reliving in all its detail the scene that had set them off. Everybody had been kissing everybody, it was true, but the stranger had singled Helen out. Or so it seemed to George. He had singled her out, although someone said he had a wife of his own. Tony something-or-other was his name; he was new in Merrivale. He had bent his handsome head, had kissed Helen. And she had put her arms around his neck and had . . .

Red fury rolled over George Carver, although he knew perfectly well that his wife loved him, was faithful to him, and might well be forgiven such momentary response to an unpremeditated impulse. He clenched his teeth to prevent himself from uttering some new and devastating remark that occurred to him. There was nothing more to be said. If she wanted to start divorce proceedings, well, let

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her! It would suit him fine! He held tightly to this conclusive thought for some time. At last he fell asleep.

Some time near morning, he dreamed. In the dream, Helen *had* left him, and far from being pleased about it, he was frantic. He was hurrying down the street outside their house, looking for her. But she was not in sight. The familiar sidewalks were deserted.

He came to the end of the street where the hypotenuse houses slanted off at their exciting angle, and he saw to his astonishment that in the field in front of those houses a fair was in progress. He could see tents and Ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds and side shows. Crowds of people were thronging the fair. Bright sunlight lay like a golden rug over everything. The colors were intensely vivid, and the music from a calliope was clear and sweet, although the tune was unfamiliar.

The thought came to him instantly that Helen must be somewhere in the crowd. The fair seemed to have two entrances, one almost opposite him, another farther down. He hurried toward the nearer one, indignant that nobody had told him about this unusual event. He looked up and saw that above the entrance colored lights, winking on and off, spelled out the words: *Hypotenuse Square.*

The logic of this pleased him, but before he had time to savor it the scene shifted and he was standing by an artificial lake somewhere inside the fair. Little boats were going round and round with merrymakers in them, two to each boat. He watched anxiously to see if Helen was among them, but the faces were unfamiliar. One couple, he noticed, was locked in a close embrace. Their boat did not circle with the others, but hovered in the background.

Abruptly he was aware of someone beside him. It was a girl, dark-haired, quite pretty. She too was watching the boats. Her face was pale and strained. It seemed to George that he had seen her briefly before, but he could not remember where.

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were red-rimmed, as if she had been crying. And George knew suddenly, with chilling certainty, that she was different from all the others. She was *different*, and because she was different, she was a deadly menace. A menace to him, just as he was to her. He knew this absolutely, and he knew that she knew it too.

Dialogue flickered between them in the wordless communication of dreams. *Where are you from?* cried George silently, knowing that she was asking the same question. *From the other side*, came the terror-ridden answer. *And what are you doing here — here in my dream?* And again the answer, mutual, inevitable: *I'm looking, looking . . . we quarreled terribly . . . I've got to find . . . I must find . . .*

A boat drifted lazily past with an old man in it. The boat had no engine; the old man was poling himself quietly along. "Don't you under-

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stand?" he said to them. "You're in the Square, the Square. And you have no business here, because you come from the other two sides."

George felt the terror mount inside him. He stared wildly at the girl, the silent question quivering between them: *What will become of you if I wake up?* And the answer was there for both of them: *You'll be gone with the rest of them — gone, gone. . . .*

The boat with the embracing couple glided past. Helen was in it, trailing her fingers lightly in the water. The man beside her was Tony.

George shouted as loud as he could, but his voice was only a whisper: *Quick, Helen, quick! We must hurry, we must get back first. Hurry! I'm not angry any more. Please hurry!*

Beside him the girl was pleading too, holding out her arms to Tony who frowned and shook his head petulantly. The old man in the other boat was leaning on his pole, watching them.

Suddenly Helen was standing beside George. He took her wrist and began pulling her away from the lake, back through the crowd toward the entrance. Now the ground sloped steeply upward. The noise and color of the fair fell behind, but looking back George could see two tiny figures struggling toward the other entrance.

The terror he had known was nothing to the panic he felt now. Helen seemed to be holding him back; she felt like a dead weight, but he would not let her go. Sobbing and gasping he dragged her upward, until the entrance loomed ahead of him. The columns supporting the arch seemed to be dissolving; they writhed like smoke. Ten paces more. Five. He heard Helen calling him, *George, George!* He made one last despairing lunge . . .

"George!" Helen was crying. "George, you're hurting my wrist! Wake up! You're having a nightmare!"

He woke, feeling the terror melt into indescribable relief. He flung his arms around Helen, held her desperately. He was shivering. "Why, George," she said, and he felt her cool hand on his forehead. "Darling, you're burning up. You've got a fever. . . ."

The fever stayed with George Carver for three days. Just another virus, the doctor said. On the fourth day he got up. On the sixth day he was ready to go back to work.

It was Joe Harmon's week to drive the members of the car pool. He picked up George at 8 o'clock, swung around the corner and collected Sid Ellison from one of the hypotenuse houses. Then he turned into the other leg of the triangle where Mert Morrison lived.

Mert came out with a piece of toast still in his hand and climbed in beside George. "Good to see you up and around, pal," he said. "How're you doing?"

"Fine," George said. "Fine."

Sid Ellison nodded at the *For Rent* sign on a house across the street. "See you've got a vacancy, Mert. Who pulled out?"

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Mert Morrison swallowed his toast. "Young couple named Kenmore — Tony and Laura Kenmore. Didn't like the place, I guess; hadn't been there more'n a couple of weeks. Left on New Year's Day, all of a sudden, no word to anybody."

The car began to move. Mert Morrison licked the last crumbs off his fingers.

"Mamie Eichorn, lives next door, said they had a big fight about something New Year's Eve. But hell, you can't believe a word Mamie says. According to her, they didn't even take their clothes, just left 'em in the closets. Ha! Next thing, she'll be telling us they murdered each other!" He fished out a pack of crumpled cigarettes. "Got a match, George? Say, you look pretty peaked. Better get the doc to give you some vitamins, or something."

George Carver sat very still. Past the windows of the car flowed the modest homes of Merrivale, neat, substantial, rectilinear. *Gone*, he was thinking, *gone*, *gone*, *gone*. . . .

"Yeah," he said hoarsely, "maybe I had, at that."

NEXT MONTH . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG**

TITLE: ***The Hedge Between***

TYPE: Suspense-Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Meredith Lee, fifteen years old, and Mr. Russell, a lawyer

COMMENTS: *How teen-age Meredith Lee solved a seven-year-old murder in just four days — her own, her very own, mystery since she was almost an eyewitness when it happened . . . an unusual story, told from a refreshing point of view.*

THE MAN NAMED RUSSELL, WHO happened to be a lawyer, sat full in the light of a solitary lamp. It shone upon the brown-covered composition book in his hands. A man named John Selby, a merchant in the small city, was seated in a low chair. He hung his head; his face was hidden; the light washed only his trembling head and the nervous struggle of his fingers. The Chief of Police, Barker, was seated in half shadow. And Doctor Coles loomed against the wall beside a white door that was ajar. It was 1:00 o'clock in the morning.

Doctor, Lawyer, Merchant, Chief . . .

"Well?" the Chief challenged. "Okay, Russell. You're smart, as Selby says you are. You come running when you're called, listen to five minutes' talk about this kid, and you predict there's got to be some such notebook around. Well? Now you've found it, why don't you see what it says?"

"I'm waiting for a direction," said the lawyer mildly. "It's not for me to turn this cover. Look at the big black letters. *Meredith Lee. Personal and Private.* It's not up to me to violate her privacy. But Selby's her kin. Coles is her doctor. And you are law and order in this town."

The doctor turned his head suddenly to the crack of the door.

"Any change?" the Chief asked eagerly.

"No. She's still unconscious. Go ahead, Russell. Don't be squeamish. She's a child, after all."

"See if there's anything helpful in there," the chief of police said. "See if that notebook can explain . . ."

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"Explains," the lawyer mused, "how a fifteen-year-old girl solved a seven-year-old murder mystery in four days . . ."

"She didn't solve it all the way," said the Chief impatiently.

Russell ignored him. "What do you say, Selby? She's your niece. Shall we read her private notebook?"

Selby's hands came palms up, briefly. The policeman spoke again, "Read it. I intend to, if you don't. I've got to get the straight of it. My prisoner won't talk."

The doctor said pompously, "After all, it may be best for the girl."

Russell said dryly, "I'm just as curious as the rest of you." He opened the book and began to read aloud.

Meredith Lee. New Notes and Jottings.

July 23rd.

Here I am at Uncle John's. The family has dumped me for two weeks while they go to New York. I don't complain. It is impossible for me to get bored, since I can always study human nature.

Uncle John looks much the same. Gray hairs show. He's thirty-seven. Why didn't he marry? Mama says he's practicing to stuff a shirt. He was very Uncle-ish and hearty when I got dumped last night, but he actually has no idea what to do with me, except tell the servants to keep me clean and fed. It's a good thing I've got resources.

Russell looked up. The Chief was chewing his lip. The doctor was frankly smiling. John Selby said, painfully, "She's right about that. Fool I was . . . I *didn't* know what to do with her." His head rolled in his hands.

"Go on," the Chief prodded.

Russell continued reading.

Went to the neighborhood drug store, first thing. Snooped down the street. I'd forgotten it, but my goodness, it's typical. Very settled. Not swank. Not poor, either. Very middle. No logic to that phrase. A thing can't be *very* middle, but it says what I feel. On the way home, a Discovery! There's a whopping big hedge between Uncle John's house and the house next door. The neighbor woman was out messing in her flower beds. Description: petite. Dark hair, with silver. Skillfully made up. Effect quite young. (N.B. Ooooh, what a bad paragraph! Choppy!)

So, filled with curiosity, I leaned over her gate and introduced myself. She's a Discovery! She's a Wicked Widow and she's *forbidden!* I didn't know that when I talked to her.

(N.B. Practice remembering dialogue accurately.)

Wicked Widow: Mr. Selby's niece, of course. I remember you, my dear. You were here as a little girl, weren't you? Wasn't the last time about seven years ago?

Meredith Lee: Yes, it was. But I don't remember you.

W.W.: Don't you? I am Josephine Corcoran. How old were you then, Meredith?

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M.L.: Only eight.

W.W.: Only eight?

We came to a stop. *I* wasn't going to repeat. That's a horrible speech habit. You can waste hours trying to communicate. So I looked around and remembered something.

M.L.: I see my tree house has disintegrated.

W.W.: Your tree house? (N.B. She repeated everything I said, and with a question mark. Careless habit? Or just pace?) Oh, yes, of course. In that big maple, wasn't it?

M.L.: Mr. Jewell — you know, Uncle John's gardener? — he built it for me. I had a cot up there and a play ice-box and a million cushions. I wouldn't come down.

W.W.: Wouldn't come down? Yes, I remember. Eight years old and your Uncle used to let you spend the night — (N.B. She looked scared. Why? If I'd fallen out and killed myself seven years ago, I wouldn't be talking to her. Elders worry retroactively.)

M.L.: Oh, Uncle John had nothing to do with it. Mama's rational. She knew it was safe. Railings, and I always pulled up my rope ladder. Nobody could get up, or get me down without a lot of trouble. I was a tomboy in those days.

W.W.: Tomboy? Yes, seven years is a long time. (N.B. No snicker. She looked serious and thoughtful, just standing with the trowel in her hand, not even smiling. That's when I got the feeling I could really communicate and it's very unusual. She must be thirty. I get that feeling with really old people or people about eighteen, sometimes. But people in between, and especially thirty, usually act like Uncle John.)

Now I forget . . . her dialogue wasn't so sparkling, I guess, but she was understanding. Did I know any young people? I said No, and she politely hoped I wouldn't be lonely. I explained that I hoped to be a Writer, so I would probably always be lonely. And she said she supposed that was true. I liked that. It's not so often somebody listens. And while she may have looked surprised at a new thought, she didn't look *amused.* My object in life is not to *amuse*, and I get tired of those smiles. So I liked her.

But then, at dinner time, just as soon as I'd said I'd met her, she got forbidden.

Uncle John: (clearing his throat) Meredith, I don't think you had better . . . (He stuck. He sticks a lot.)

M.L.: Better what?

Uncle John: Er . . . (N.B. *English* spelling. Americans say uh. I am an American.) Uh . . . Mrs. Corcoran and I are not . . . uh . . . especially friendly and I'd rather you didn't . . . (Stuck again)

M.L.: Why not? Are you feuding?

Uncle John: No, no. I merely . . .

M.L.: Merely what? I think she's very nice.

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Uncle John: Uh . . . (very stuffy) . . . You are hardly in a position to know anything about it. I'm afraid she is not the kind of woman your mother would . . .

M.L.: What kind is she? (You have to really pry at Uncle John.)

Uncle John: (finally) Not socially acceptable.

M.L.: What! Oh, for heaven's sakes, Uncle John! That's the stuffiest thing I *ever* heard! Why?

Uncle John: It's not stuffy, Meredith, and it's not easy to explain why. (Looks at me as if he wonders whether I understand English.) Maybe, if you knew that there was a strange business, years ago . . . Her husband was . . . uh . . . shot in rather mysterious circum. . . .

M.L.: Shot! Do you mean killed? Do you mean *murdered?* Really? Oh, boy! How? When? Who did it? What happened?

Now, why did Uncle John act so surprised? Did he think I'd be-scared? Don't people who are thirty ever remember how they didn't used to be *scared* by interesting things? But he *was* surprised and also very sticky and stuffy for a while. But I kept prying.

And I think it's just pitiful. I don't know why Uncle John can't see how pitiful it is. Poor Mrs. Corcoran. Her husband came home late one night and as he was standing at his own front door, somebody shot him from behind. They found the gun but nothing else. He wasn't robbed. It's just a mystery. So, just because it is a mystery and nobody knows, they've treated her as if she were a murderess! I can just see how it's been and I'm ashamed of Uncle John. He sure is practicing to stuff a shirt. He lets the hedge grow, and he goes along with the stupid town. It sounds as if nobody has accepted her socially ever since. Fine thing! She is supposed to be a wicked widow, just because her husband got murdered by person or persons unknown. Probably the town thinks such a thing couldn't happen to a respectable person. But it *could*. I'm very sorry for her.

The thing I'm saving for the bottom of this page is — it's my murder! I got that out of Uncle John. What do you know! What do you know! *I* was in my tree house that very night!

I'm just faintly remembering how I got whisked out of here so fast, that time. I never did know why. Holy cats! Eight years old. I'm asleep in a tree and a murder takes place right under me! And I never even knew it! They didn't tell me! They didn't even ask me a single question! A fine thing! A real murder in my own life, and I can't remember even one thing about it!

The lawyer paused. The doctor stirred, looked through the door. Three raised heads queried him. He said, "Nothing. It may be a good while yet before she is conscious. Don't . . . worry."

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Selby turned to stare blindly at the lamp. "My sister should never — should never have left her with me. I had no business — no business to tell her a word about it."

"You thought she'd be scared away from the widow?"

"I suppose so."

The Chief said, "Now, wait a minute. The girl puts down in there that she *couldn't remember even one thing* about the killing? But that makes no sense at all."

"That's the July twenty-third entry," said Russell. "Here is July twenty-fifth. Let's see."

I couldn't stand it — I just can't think about anything else but my murder. I had to find out more. This afternoon I had tea with the widow. I don't think she's wicked at all. She's very sad, actually. She was in the garden again. I just know she was conscious of me, on Uncle John's side of the hedge, all day yesterday. Today, finally, she spoke to me. So I went around and leeched onto her.

(N.B. Practice getting the "saids" in)

Nervously, she said, "I hope your Uncle won't be angry."

I said, pretending to blurt, "Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, Uncle John told me about the awful thing that happened to your husband. And to think I was right up in my tree house. I can't stop thinking about it."

"Don't think about it," she said, looking pretty tense. "It was long ago, and there is no need. I'm sorry he spoke of it."

"Oh, I made him," said I. "And now when I think that for all I know, I might have seen and heard exactly what happened, and the only trouble is, I was so little, I can't *remember* — it just about makes me wild!"

She looked at me in a funny way. I thought she was going to blurt, "Oh, if only you could remember . . ." But actually, she said, "If you would like more cake please help yourself."

"It's too bad it's a mystery," I said (cried). "Why couldn't they solve it? Don't you wish they could solve it? Maybe it's not too late."

She looked startled. (N.B. What happens to eyes, anyhow, to make the whites show more? Observe.)

"I wish you would tell me the details," I said. "Couldn't they find out *anything?*"

"No, no. My dear, I don't think we had better talk about it at all. It's not the sort of thing a sweet child ought to be brooding about," she said.

I was desperate. "Mrs. Corcoran, the other day I thought better of you. Because you didn't laugh, for instance, when I mentioned that I used to be a tomboy, years ago. Most older people would have laughed. I'll never understand why. Obviously, I'm quite different and, seven years has made a big change, and why it's so *funny* if I *know* that,

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I cannot see." She was leaning back and feeling surprised, I judged. "So don't disappoint me, now, and think of me as an eight-year-old child," I said, "when I may have the freshest eye and be the open-mindedest person around."

She nibbled her lips. She wasn't offended. I think she's very intelligent and responding.

"I'm *going* to brood and you can't stop that," I told her. "I just wish I could help. I've been thinking that maybe if I tried I *could* remember."

"Oh, no. No, my dear. Thank you," she said. "I know you would like to help. But you were only eight at that time. I don't suppose, then or now, anyone would believe you."

"And now I'm *only* fifteen," I said crossly, "and nobody will *tell* me."

She said sweetly, "You're rather an extraordinary fifteen, my dear. If I tell you about it, Meredith, and you see how hopeless it is, do you think perhaps then you can let it rest?"

I said I thought so. (What a lie!)

"Harry, my husband, was often late getting home, so that night," she said, "I wasn't at all worried. I simply went to bed, as usual, and to sleep. Something woke me. I don't know what. My window was open. It was very warm, full summer. I lay in my bed, listening. There used to be a big elm out there beside my walk. It got the disease all the elms are getting, and it had to be cut down and taken away. But that night I could see its leaf patterns on the wall, that the moon always used to make at night, and the leaves moving gently. There was a full moon, I remember. A lovely quiet summer night." (N.B. She's pretty good with a mood.)

"I had been awakened, yet I could hear nothing, until I heard the shot. It paralyzed me. I lay back stiff and scared. Harry didn't . . . cry out. I heard nothing more for a while. Then I thought I heard shrubs rustling. When I finally pulled myself to the window, your Uncle John was there." She stopped and I had to poke her up to go on.

"Your Uncle was forcing his way through the hedge, which was low, then. And I saw Harry lying on our little stoop. I ran to my bedroom door and my maid was standing in the hall, quite frightened, and we ran down. Your Uncle told me that Harry was . . . not alive. (N.B. Pretty delicate diction.) He was calling the doctor and the police from my phone. I sat down trembling on a chair in the hall. I remember, now, that as your Uncle started out of the house again, he seemed to recall where you were and went running to his garage for a ladder to get you down."

"Darn it," I said.

She knew what I meant, because she said right away, "You couldn't remember — you must have been sleepy. Perhaps you didn't really wake up."

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"I suppose so," said I disgustedly. "Go on."

"Well, the police came very quickly — Chief Barker himself. And of course, Doctor Coles. They did find the gun, caught in the hedge. They never traced it. There weren't any fingerprints anywhere. And no footprints in that dry weather. So they never found out . . ." She pulled herself together. "And that, my dear, is all." She started drinking her tea, looking very severe with herself.

I said, "There never was a trial?"

"There was never anyone to try."

"Not you, Mrs. Corcoran?"

"No one accused me," she said, smiling faintly. But her eyes were so sad.

"They did, though," I said, kind of mad. "They sentenced you, too."

"Dear girl," she said very seriously, "You mustn't make a heroine of me. Chief Barker and Doctor Coles . . . and your Uncle John, too, I'm sure . . . tried as helpfully as they could to clear it all up, but they never could find out who, or even why. You see? So . . ." She was getting flustery.

"So the wind begins to blow against you," I said, mad as the dickens. "Or how come the hedge? Why does Uncle John tell me not to come here? What makes him think you're so wicked?"

"Does he?" she said, "I am not wicked, Meredith. Neither am I a saint. I'm human."

I always thought that was a corny saying. But it's effective. It makes you feel for whoever says it, as if they had admitted something just awful that you wouldn't admit, either — unless, of course, you were *trapped.*

"Harry and I were not always harmonious," she said. "Few couples are. He drank a good bit. Many men do. I suppose the neighbors noticed. Some of them, in fact, used to feel quite sorry for me. I . . ." Her face was real bitter, but she has a quick hunching way of pulling herself together. ". . . shouldn't be saying these things to you. Why do I forget you are so young? I shouldn't. Forgive me, and don't be upset."

"Not me," I told her. "I'm pretty detached. And don't forget my eye is fresh. I can see the trouble. There isn't anybody else to suspect. You need . . ."

"No, no. No more. I had no right to talk to you. And you'd better not come again. It is not I, my dear. I like you very much. I would love to see you often. But —"

I said, "I think Uncle John is a stuffy old stinker. To bend the way the wind blows. But *I* don't have to!"

"Yes, you do," she said, kind of fixing me with her eye. "It's not nice, Meredith, to be this side of the hedge. Now, please, never question your Uncle John's behavior." She was getting very upset. "You must . . . truly, you must . . . believe me . . . when I say . . . I

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think he meant . . . to be very kind . . . at that time." She spaced it like that, taking breaths in between.

"But that mean old hedge, for the whole town to see. It makes me mad!" I said.

She fixed me, again. She said very fast almost like whispering, "Perhaps it was I, Meredith, who let the hedge grow."

Naturally, my mouth opened, but before I got anything out she said, loudly, "It was best. There, now . . ."

(N.B. Yep. I was really disappointed. How I hate it when people say, "There, now." Implying that they know a million things more than me. And I better be comforted. I'm *not*. I'm irritated. It means they want to stop talking to me, and that's all.)

"It's all so old," she continued in that phony petting-the-kitty kind of way. "And nothing will change it. Let it rest. Thank you for coming and thank you for being open-minded. But go away now, Meredith, and promise me not to think about it any more."

I fixed her with *my* eye. I said, "Thank you very much for the lovely cake."

But I'm not angry. I feel too sorry for her. Besides, she let out hints enough and I should have caught on. Well, I didn't, then. But after the session I had with Uncle John . . . *Are they ever dumb!*

We had finished dinner when I decided to see what more I could pry out of *him*. I said, "If Harry Corcoran was a drinking man he was probably drunk the night he got shot."

Uncle John nearly knocked his coffee over. "How do you know he was a drinking man?" roared he. "Have you been gossiping with Mrs. Jewell?" (Mrs. Jewell is the housekeeper. Vocabulary about one hundred words.)

"Oh, no, I haven't. Was he?"

"Who?"

"Harry Corcoran?"

"What?"

"Drunk?"

"So they say," bites Uncle John, cracking his teeth together, "Now, Meredith —"

"Where were you at the time of the murder?" chirped I.

(N.B. Nope. Got to learn to use the "saids." They're neutraller.)

"Meredith, I wish you —"

"I know what you wish, but I wish you'd tell me. Aw, come on, Uncle John. My own murder! Maybe if I had all the facts, I'd stop thinking so much about it. Don't you see that?"

(N.B. False. The more you know about anything the more interesting it gets. But he didn't notice.)

"I told you the facts," he said (muttered?), "and I wish I had kept my big mouth shut. Your mother will skin me alive. How the devil did I get into this?"

(N.B. I thought this was an im-

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provement. He's usually so darned stuffy when he talks to me.)

"You didn't tell me any details. Please, Uncle John . . ." I really nagged him. I don't think he's had much practice defending himself, because finally, stuffy as anything, he talked.

"Very well. I'll tell you the details as far as I know them. Then I shall expect to hear no more about it."

"I know," said I. True. I knew what he *expected*. I didn't really promise anything. But he's not very analytical. "Okay. Pretend you're on the witness stand. Where were you at the time?"

"I was, as it happened . . . (N.B. Stuffy! Phrase adds nothing. Of course it happened.) . . . in the library that night working late on some accounts. It was nearly 1:00 in the morning, I believe . . . (N.B. Of course he believes, or he wouldn't say so) . . . when I heard Harry Corcoran whistling as he walked by in the street."

"What tune?"

"What?" (I started to repeat but he didn't need it. Lots of people make you repeat a question they heard quite well just so they can take a minute to figure out the answer.) "Oh, that Danny Boy song. Favorite of his. That's how I knew who it was. He was coming along from the end of town, past this house —"

"Was that usual?"

"It was neither usual nor unusual," said Uncle John crossly, "It's merely a detail."

"Okay. Go on."

"The next thing I noticed was the shot."

"You were paralyzed?"

"What?" He just about glared at me. "Yes, momentarily. Then I ran out my side door and pushed through the hedge and found him on his own doorstep . . . uh . . ."

"Not living," I said delicately.

He gave me another nasty look. "Now, that's all there was to it."

"That's not all! What did you do then? Didn't you even look for the murderer?"

"I saw nobody around. I realized there might be somebody concealed, of course. So I picked up his key from where it had fallen on the stoop —"

"The Corcorans' door was locked?"

"It was locked and I unlocked it and went inside to the phone. As I was phoning, Mrs. Corcoran and her maid came downstairs. I called Chief Barker and Doctor Coles."

"Yes, I know. And then you ran to get the ladder and pulled me down out of my tree. Okay. But you're leaving things out, Uncle John. You are deliberately being barren. You don't give any atmosphere at all. What was Mrs. Corcoran's emotional state?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Uncle John with his nose in a sniffing position, "and if I had, it would not be a fact."

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I pounced. "You think she did it?"

He pulled his chin practically to the back of his neck. "I wish you would not say that. I have little right to speculate and none to make a judgment. There was no evidence."

"But you did pass judgment. You told me she was a certain kind of—"

"Meredith, I know only one fact. Your mother would not like this at all. In any case, I will not discuss Mrs. Corcoran's character with you. I must insist you take my word for it. There is no way. . . ." He kind of held his forehead.

"Uncle John, who let the hedge grow?"

"What? The hedge belongs to me."

"That ain't the way I heered it," said stupid I.

So *he* pounced. "Where have you been hearing things? Who told you Harry Corcoran was a drinking man? Where have you been, Meredith?"

So I confessed. No use writing down the blasting I got. It was the usual. Bunch of stuff about my elders wanting no harm to come to me, things not understood in my philosophy, mysterious evils that I wot not of, and all that sort of stuff. Why doesn't he tell me plain out that it's none of my business?

Well, I don't think it's evil. I think it's foolishness. I think that Uncle John's too sticky and stuffy to tell me . . . (Probably thinks I never heard of s-blank-x) . . . is that he used to be romantic about the pretty lady next door. Probably Uncle John saw a lot of Harry's drunken comings-home and heard plenty of the disharmonizing. Probably he is one neighbor who felt sorry for her. Wonder if they were in love and said so. I doubt it. Probably they just cast glances at each other over the hedge and said nothing. That would be just like Uncle John.

Anyhow, when somebody shoots Harry Corcoran in the back, the widow gets it into her head that Uncle John did it. After all, she heard things — rustling bushes — looked out, and there he was. But gosh, even if she felt romantic about him too, she'd draw the line at murder! But of course, Uncle John didn't do it. He thinks *she* did. He knows she was unhappy with Harry. But he draws the line at murder, too. So, these dopes, what do they do? They have no "right" to pass "judgment" or "accuse" anybody. They pull themselves in, with the hedge between. All these years, with their very own suspicions proving that neither one could have done it . . . Probably if they'd had sense enough to speak out and have a big argument, they could have got married and been happy long ago.

Oh, how ridiculous! How pitiful! And oh, that I was born to put it right! (N.B. Who said that?)

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The lawyer put the book down. John Selby groaned. "I had no idea . . . no idea what she had in her head. I knew she was bright . . ."

"Bright, yes," said Doctor Coles, "but that kid's so insufferably condescending!"

"You wouldn't like it even if she guessed right," said Russell thoughtfully. "The girl's got a hard way to go. She'll be lonely."

"Thought she was smart, all right," growled Barker. "Wasn't as smart as she thought she was. She was wrong, I take it?"

Selby didn't answer. His gaze was fixed on the lawyer's face.

"You shouldn't blame her for being wrong," Russell murmured. "She's not yet equipped to understand a lot of things. But she is compelled to try. There's her intelligent curiosity fighting a way past some clichés, but the phrase 'feel romantic' is flat, for her, and without shading."

"I still can't see what happened," Barker broke in to complain. "Never mind the shading. Go ahead — if there's more of it."

"Yes, there's more. We come to July twenty-sixth — yesterday." Russell began to read once more.

I've figured. I know exactly how to do it. I'll say *I can remember!* I'll tell them that when I was up in my tree that night the shot or something woke me, and I saw a stranger running away . . .

"So she made it up! Told a story!" Chief Barker slapped his thigh. "But . . . now wait a minute . . . you believed her, Selby?"

"I believed her," her uncle sighed.

"Go on. Go on," the doctor said.

I know how to make them believe me, too. This will be neat! I'll tell Uncle John first, and I'll mix into the story I tell him all the little bits I got from her that he doesn't know I've been told. So, since *they'll* be true, he'll be fooled, and think I really remember. Then I'll go to her, but in the story I tell her, all I have to do is mix in the bits I got from Uncle John that she doesn't know I've been told. It'll work! Ha, they'll never catch on to the trick of it. They'll believe me! Then they can get together, if they still want to. I'm not worried about telling a kind of lie about it. If anybody official starts asking questions I can always shudder, and be too young and tender, and clam up.

Get it exactly right. Make lists.

Russell looked up. "Meredith's good at math, I suppose?"

"A plus," her uncle groaned. "She scares me."

Russell nodded and began to read again.

List No. 1. For Uncle John. Things she told me.

1. Warm night. Full moon.
2. The elm tree that used to be there.
3. The gun was found *in the hedge.*
4. Harry didn't yell.

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Now, put all these points in. Future dialogue.

By Meredith Lee.

M.L.: Oh, Uncle John, I do remember now!

Uncle John: What?

(Whoops! Since this is in the future, I better not write *his* dialogue. It might confuse me.)

M.L.: I was up in my room, thinking, and I began to hum that tune. That Danny Boy. It made the whole thing come back to me like a dream. Now I remember waking up on my cot and hearing that whistling. I peeked out between my railings. The moon was very bright that night. It was warm, too, real summer. I could see the elm tree by the Corcoran's walk. (Pause. Bewildered.) Which elm tree, Uncle John? There's none there now. *Was* there an elm tree, seven years ago?

(Ha, ha, that'll *do* it!)

I saw a man come up their walk. I must have heard the shot. I thought somebody had a firecracker left over from Fourth of July. I saw the man fall down but he didn't make any noise, so I didn't think he was hurt. I thought he fell asleep.

(What a touch! Whee!)

Then I saw there was another man, down there, and he threw something into the hedge. The hedge crackled where it landed. Then this man jumped through their gate and ran, and then you came out of this house . . .

(By this time the stuffing should be coming out of Uncle John.)

I'll say I don't know who the stranger was. "But it wasn't you, Uncle John," I'll say, "and the widow Corcoran's been thinking so for seven years and I'm going to tell her . . ."

Then I'll run out of the house as fast as I can.

He'll follow — he'll absolutely have to!

Russell looked up. "Was it anything like that?"

"It was almost exactly like that," said John Selby, lifting his tired, anxious face. "And I did follow. She was right about that. I absolutely had to."

"Smart," said Chief Barker, smacking his lips, "the way she worked that out."

"Too smart," the doctor said, and then, "Nurse? Yes?" He went quickly through the door.

"My sister will skin me alive," said John Selby, rousing himself. "Kid's had me jumping through hoops. Who am I to deal with the likes of her? Looks at me with those big brown eyes. Can't tell whether you're talking to a baby or a woman. Everythink I did was a mistake. I never had the least idea what she was thinking. You're smart about people, Russell — that's why I need you. I feel as if I'd been through a wind-tunnel. Help me with Meredith. I feel terrible about the whole thing, and if she's seriously hurt and I'm responsible . . ."

"You say you don't understand young people," began Russell, "but

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even if you did, this young person . . ."

"You take it too hard, John," said Chief Barker impatiently. "Doc doesn't think she's hurt too seriously. And she got herself into it, after all. Listen, go on. What did she say to the widow? That's what I need to know. Is it in there?"

"It must be," said Russell. "She made another list."

List No. 2. For the widow. Things Uncle John told me.

1. Harry was whistling Danny Boy.
2. He came in the direction that passed this house.
3. He was drunk.
4. He dropped his key.

Not so good. Yes it is, too. What woke her? She doesn't know, but I do! Future dialogue:

M.L.: Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, I think I'm beginning to remember! I really think so! Listen, I think I heard a man whistling. And it was that song about Danny Boy. And he was walking from the east, past our house. Would it have been your husband?

(Ha! She's going to *have* to say Yes!)

And he . . . it seems to me that he didn't walk right. He wobbled. He wobbled up your walk and he dropped something. Maybe a key. It must have been a key because I saw him bending over to hunt for it but . . .

(Artistic pause here? I think so.)

Oh, now I remember! He straightened up. He couldn't have found it because he called out something. It was a name! It must have been . . . Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, could it have been your name, being called in the night, that woke you up?

(Betcha! Betcha!)

Well, the rest of hers goes on the same. Stranger, throws gun, runs away, just as Uncle John comes out. "So it wasn't you," I'll say, "and I can prove it! But poor Uncle John has been afraid it *was*."

Then what? I guess maybe I'd better start to bawl.

Yep. I think that will do it. I think that's pretty good. They're bound to believe me. Of course, the two stories are not identical, but they can't be. *They'll* never notice the trick of it. They'll just have to be convinced that it wasn't either one of them who shot Harry Corcoran. I can't wait to see what will happen. What will they *do?* What will they *say?* Oh-ho-ho, is this ever research! I better cry soft enough so I can hear and memorize.

When shall I try it? I can't wait! Now is a good time. Uncle John is in the library and she's home. I can see a light upstairs in her house. Here goes, then.

(N.B. Would I rather be an actress? Consider this. M.L.)

The lawyer closed the book. "That's all." He put his hand to his eyes but his mouth was curving tenderly.

"Some scheme," said Barker in

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awe. "Went to a lot of trouble to work up all that plot . . ."

"She had a powerful motive," Russell murmured.

"My romance," said Selby bitterly.

"Oh, no. Research for her," the lawyer grinned.

"Whatever the motive, this remarkable kid went and faked those stories and she had it wrong," growled Barker. "But she must have got something right. Do you realize that?" He leaned into the light. "Selby, as far as you were concerned, you believed that rigmarole of hers. You thought she *did* remember the night of the killing and she *had* seen a stranger?"

"I did," John Selby said, sounding calmer. "I was considerably shaken. I had always suspected Josephine Corcoran, for reasons of my own."

"Lots of us suspected," the Chief said dryly, "for various reasons. But never could figure how she managed, with you rushing out to the scene so fast and the maid in the upstairs hall."

"What were your reasons, John?" Russell asked.

"In particular, there was a certain oblique conversation that took place in the course of a flirtation that appalls me, now. It seemed to me, one evening, that she was thinking that the death of her husband might be desirable — and might be arranged. I can't quote her exactly, you understand, but the hint was there. She thought him stupid and cruel and intolerable, and the hint was that if he were dead and gone she'd be *clean*. The shallow, callous, self-righteous . . . the *idea!* As if her life should rightfully be cleared of him with no more compunction that if he'd been . . . well, a wart on her hand." He held his head again. "Now, how is a man going to explain to his fifteen-year-old niece just what makes him think a woman is wicked? The feeling you get, that emanates from the brain and body?" He groaned. "That little talk pulled me out of my folly, believe me. That's when I shied off and began to let the hedge grow. When you realize that not long after that he *did* die, you'll see how I've lived with the memory of that conversation for seven years. Wondering. Was I right about what she had in mind and did I perhaps not recoil enough? Had I not sufficiently discouraged the . . . the idea? There was no evidence. There was nothing. But I've had a burden close to guilt and I've stayed on my side of the hedge, believe me, and begun to study to stuff a shirt." He groaned again and shifted in the chair. "When I thought the child had really seen a stranger with that gun, I was stunned. As soon as I realized where Meredith had gone . . ."

"You followed. You saw them through the widow's front door?" The Chief was reassembling this testimony.

"Yes. I could see them. At the top of the stairs. Mrs. Corcoran standing by the newel post and Meredith talking earnestly to her."

"You couldn't hear?"

"No, unfortunately. But if Mere-

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dith had rehearsed it, if she stuck to her script, then we must have it here."

"If it's there, I don't get it." Chief Barker passed his hand over his face. "Now, suddenly, you say — in the middle of the girl's story — the widow yelled something that you *could* hear?"

"She yelled, '*I told you to keep out of this, you nosy brat!*' And then she pushed Meredith violently enough to send her rolling down the stairs." Selby began to breathe heavily.

"And you got through the door . . ."

"By the time I got through the door, she was on the girl like a wildcat. She was frantic. She *meant* to hurt her." John Selby glared.

"So you plucked the widow off her prey and called us for help? Did Mrs. Corcoran try to explain at all?" Russell inquired.

"She put out hysterical cries. 'Poor dear! Poor darling!' But she meant to hurt Meredith. I heard. I saw. I know. And she knows that I know."

"Yes, the widow gave herself away," said Russell. "She was wicked, all right."

"So we've got her," the Chief growled, "for the assault on Meredith. Also, we know darned well she shot her husband seven years ago. But she won't talk. What I need," the Chief was anxious, "is to figure out what it was that set her off. What did the kid say that made her nerve crack? I can't see it. I just don't get it."

The doctor had been standing quietly in the door. Now he said, "Maybe Meredith can tell us. She's all right. Almost as good as new, I'd say."

John Selby was on his feet. So was Chief Barker. "Selby, you go first," the doctor advised. "No questions for the first minute or two."

The Chief turned and sighed. "Beats me."

Russell said, "One thing, Harry Corcoran never called out his wife's name in the night. Selby, who heard a whistle, would have heard such a cry."

"Do I see what you're getting at?" said Barker shrewdly. 'It shows the kid didn't get *that far* in the story or the widow would have known she was story-telling."

"She certainly didn't get as far as any guilty stranger, or the widow would have been delighted. Let's see."

"There was something. . . ."

"Was it the tune? No, that's been known. Selby told that long ago. Was it Harry's drunkenness? No, because medical evidence exists. Couldn't be that."

"For the Lord's sakes, let's *ask* her," the Chief said.

They went through the door. The nurse had effaced herself watchfully. Four men stood around the bed. Doctor, Lawyer, Merchant, Chief . . .

Young Meredith Lee looked very small, lying against the pillow with her brown hair pressed back by the bandages, her freckles sharpened by the pallor of her face, her big brown eyes round and shocked.

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"How do you feel, honey?" rumbled the Chief.

"She pushed me down." Meredith's voice was a childish whimper.

Her Uncle John patted the bed and said compulsively, "There, Meredith. There now . . ."

"Don't say that," the Chief put in with a chuckle. "It just annoys her."

The girl saw her notebook in Russell's hands. She winced and for a flash her eyes narrowed and something behind the child face was busy reassessing the situation.

"Miss Lee," said the lawyer pleasantly, "My name is Russell. I'm a friend of your Uncle John's. I'm the one who ferreted out your notes. I hope you'll forgive us for reading them. Thanks to you, now we know how wicked the widow was seven years ago."

"I only pretended," said Meredith in a thin treble. "I was only eight. I don't really remember anything at all." She shrank in the bed, very young and tender.

Her uncle said, "We know how you pretended. I . . . I had no idea you were so smart."

"That was some stunt," the doctor said.

"Very clever," the lawyer said, "the two stories as you worked them out."

"You're quite a story-teller, honey," chimed in Chief Barker.

On the little girl's face something struggled and lost. Meredith gave them one wild indignant look of pure outraged intelligence before her face crumpled completely. "I am not either!" she bawled. "I'm not any good! I got it all wrong! Didn't get the plot right. Didn't get the characters right. I guess I don't know *anything!* I guess I might as well give up . . ." She flung herself over and sobbed bitterly.

Chief Barker said, "She's okay, isn't she? She's not in pain?"

The nurse rustled, muttering "shock." The doctor said stiffly, "Come now, Meredith. This isn't a bit good for you."

But Selby said, to the rest of them, "See? That's the way it goes. She's eight and she's eighty. She can cook up a complex stunt like that and then bawl like a baby. I give up! I don't know what you should do with her. I've wired my sister. She'll skin us both, no doubt. Meredith, *please*. . . ."

Meredith continued to howl.

The lawyer said sharply, "That's right, Meredith. You may as well give up trying to be a writer if you are going to cry over your first mistakes instead of trying to learn from them. Will you be grown-up for a minute and listen? We seriously want your help to convict a murderess."

"You do not," wailed Meredith. "I'm too stupid!"

"Don't be a hypocrite," snapped the lawyer. "You are not stupid. As a matter of fact, you are extremely stuffy — as this book proves to us."

Meredith choked on a sob. Then slowly she opened one brown eye.

"The average young person," ham-

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mered the lawyer, "has little or no respect for an elder's experience and nothing can make him see its value until he gets some himself. But even a *beginning* writer should have a less conventional point of view."

"Now wait a minute," bristled John Selby. "Don't scold her. She's had an awful time. Listen, she meant well . . ."

Meredith sat up and mopped her cheek with the sheet. The brown eyes withered him. "Pul-lease, Uncle John," said Meredith Lee.

So John Selby raised his head and settled his shoulders. "Okay." He forced a grin. "Maybe I'm not too old to learn. You want me to lay it on the line? All right, you *didn't* mean well. You were perfectly vain and selfish. You were going to fix up my life and Josephine Corcoran's life as a little exercise for your superior wisdom." His stern voice faltered. "Is that better?"

Meredith said, tartly, "At least, it's rational." She looked around and her voice was not a baby's. "You are all positive the widow is a murderess," she said flatly.

Chief Barker said, "Well, honey, we always did kind of think so."

"Don't talk down to her," snapped John Selby, "or she'll talk down to you. I . . . I get that much."

"Who are you, anyhow?" asked Meredith of the Chief.

He told her. "And I am here to get to the bottom of a crime. Now, young lady," the Chief was no longer speaking with any jovial look at all, "You jumped to a wrong conclusion, you know. She *was* guilty."

"I don't see *why* you've always thought so," said Meredith rebelliously.

"I guess you don't," said Barker. "Because it's a matter of experience. Of a lot of things. In the first place, I know what my routine investigation can or cannot turn up. When it turns up *no* sign of any stranger whatsoever, I tend to believe that there wasn't one."

The Chief's jaw was thrust forward. The little girl did not wince. She listened gravely.

"In the second place, as you noticed yourself, there's nobody else around here to suspect. In the third place, nine times out of ten, only a wife is close enough to a man to have a strong enough motive."

"Nine times out of ten," said Meredith scornfully.

"That's experience," said Barker, "and you scoff at the nine times because you think we forget that there can be a tenth time. You are wrong, young lady. Now, somebody shot Harry Corcoran . . ."

"Why don't you suspect Uncle John?" flashed Meredith.

"No motive," snapped Barker.

"Meredith," began her Uncle, "I'm afraid you . . ."

"Speak up," said Russell.

"Yes. Right." Selby straightened again. "Well, then, listen. I'd no more murder a man as a favor to a neighbor than I'd jump over the moon. Your whole idea — that Josephine Corcoran

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would *think* I had — is ridiculous. Whatever she is, she's too mature for that. Furthermore, I never did want to marry her. And your mother may skin me for this but so help me you'd better know, men sometimes don't and women know it." Meredith blinked. "Also, even if I had," roared her Uncle John, "Barker knows it might occur to me that there is such a thing as divorce. Just as good a way to get rid of a husband, and a lot safer than murder."

Meredith's tongue came out and licked her lip.

"Now, as to her motive, she hated Harry Corcoran bitterly . . . bitterly. She's . . . well, she's wicked. To know that is . . . is a matter of experience. You spot it. Some cold and selfish, yet hot and reckless thing. That's the best I can do."

"It's not bad," said Meredith humbly, "I mean, thank you, Uncle John. Where is she now?"

"In the hospital," said Chief Barker, "with my men keeping their eye on her."

"Was she hurt?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "She's being hysterical. That is, you see, she was startled into making a terrible mistake when she pushed you, my dear. Now, all she can think to do is fake a physical or psychic collapse. But it's strictly a phony. I can't tell you exactly how I know that . . ."

"I suppose it's experience," said Meredith solemnly. She seemed to retreat deeper into the pillow. "I was all wrong about her. The town was *right!*" She looked as if she might cry, having been forced to this concession.

Russell said briskly, "That's not enough. No good simply saying you were wrong. You need to understand what happened to you, just how you were led."

"Led?" said Meredith distastefully.

"The widow was guilty," Russell said. "Begin with that. Now look back at the time you first hung over her gate. You couldn't know she was guilty or even suspect it, because you hadn't so much as heard about the murder yet. How could you guess the fright she got, remembering that little girl in the tree? You thought it was retroactive worry — that you might have fallen. Because that is a kind of fear in your experience. Do you see, now, when you turned up, so full of vigor and intelligence, that she never felt less like smiling in her life. *Of course* she took you seriously. And you were charmed."

"Naturally," said Meredith bravely.

"I can see, and now you should be able to see, how she tried to use your impulsive sympathy. Maybe she hoped that when you tried — as you were bound to try — to remember the night, long ago, that your imagination would be biased in her favor."

"I guess it was," said Meredith bleakly.

"Probably, she tried to put suspicion of your Uncle John into your head, not from innocence, but to supply a missing suspect to the keen and much too brainy curiosity that had her terrified. Now, don't be

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downcast," the lawyer added, his warm smile breaking. "I'd have been fooled, too. After all, this is hindsight."

"Probably you wouldn't have been fooled," said Meredith stolidly, "Experience, huh?"

"I've met a few murderers before," said Russell gently.

"Well, I've met a murderess now," said Meredith gravely. "Boy, was I ever dumb!" She sighed.

The Chief said, "All clear? Okay. Now, what do you say we find out where you were *smart?* What *did* it? Can't we get to that?"

"Smart?" said Meredith.

"This is our question to you, young lady. What cracked Mrs. Corcoran's nerve? Where were you in that story when she flew at you and pushed you down the stairs?"

The girl was motionless.

"You see, dear," began the doctor.

"She sees," said her Uncle John ferociously.

Meredith gave him a grateful lick of the eye. "Well, I was just past the key . . ." she said. She frowned. "And *then* she yelled and pushed me." The brown eyes turned, bewildered.

"What were the exact words?" said Barker briskly, "Russell, read that part again."

But Russell repeated, lingeringly, "Just past the key . . . ?"

"I don't get it," Barker said. "Do you?"

"I just thought she'd be glad," said Meredith in a small groan. "But she pushed me and hurt me. I got it *wrong.*" She seemed to cower. She was watching Russell.

"You got it right," said he. "Listen. And follow me. Harry Corcoran was shot in the back."

"That's right," the Chief said.

"The key was on the doorstep." The lawyer was talking to the girl.

"I picked it up," said Selby.

"All this time we've been assuming that he dropped the key *because he was shot.* But that isn't what you said, Meredith. *You* said that he dropped the key *because he was drunk.* Now, all this time we have assumed that he was shot from behind, from somewhere near the hedge. But if you got it right, when he bent over to pick up the key . . . and was shot in the back . . ." Russell waited. He didn't have to wait long.

"*She* shot him from above," said Meredith, quick as a rabbit. "*She* was upstairs."

"Fom *above*," said Barker, sagging. "And the widow's been waiting for seven years for some bright brain around here to think of that. Yep. Shot from a screenless window. Threw the gun out, closed the window, opened her door, faced her maid. Pretty cool. Pretty lucky. Pretty smart. And there is nothing you could call evidence, even yet." But the Chief was not discouraged or dismayed. He patted the bed covers. "Don't you worry, honey. You got her, all right. And I've made out with less. By golly, I got her method, now, and that's going to be leverage. And, by golly, one thing she's going to have

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to tell me, and that is *why* she pushed you down the stairs."

"She needn't have," said Meredith, in the same thin, woeful voice. "*I* didn't know . . . *I* didn't understand." Then her face changed and something was clicking in her little head. "But she still *thinks* I saw him drop the key. Couldn't I go where she is? Couldn't I . . . break her down? I could *act*." The voice trailed off. They weren't going to let her go, the four grown men.

"*I'm* going," said Selby grimly. "I'll break her down."

"Stay in bed," said the doctor, at the same time. "Nurse will be here. I may be needed with the widow."

"And I," said Russell. But still he didn't move. "Miss Lee," he said to the little girl, "may I make a prophecy? You'll go on studying the whole world, you'll get experience, and acquire insight, and you will not give up until you become a writer." He saw the brown eyes clear; the misting threat dried away. He laid the notebook on the covers. "You won't need to be there," he said gently, "because you can imagine." He held out a pencil. "Maybe you'd like to be working on an ending?" She was biting her left thumb but her right hand twitched as she took the pencil.

"Meredith," said her Uncle John, "here's one thing you can put in. You sure took the stuffing out of me. And I don't care what your mother's going to say . . ."

Meredith said, as if she were in a trance, "When is Mama coming?"

"In the morning. I wish I hadn't wired — I wish I hadn't alarmed her . . . We're going to be in for it."

"Oh, I don't know, Uncle John," said Meredith. The face was elfin now, for a mocking second of time. Then it was sober. She put the pencil into her mouth and stared at the wall. The nurse moved closer. The four men cleared their throats. Nothing happened. Meredith was gone, imagining. Soon the four grown men tiptoed away.

Meredith Lee. New notes and Jottings. July 27th.

Early to bed. Supposed to be worn out. False, but convenient for all of us.

Everybody helped manage Mama. Doctor Coles put a small pink bandage on me. Chief Barker and Mr. Russell met her train and said gloating things about the widow confessing.

But, of course, Mama had to blast us some. She was just starting to rend Uncle John when I said, "Don't be so cross with him, Mama. He is the Hero. Saved my life." That took her aback. She was about to start on me, but Uncle John jumped in. "Meredith's the Heroine, sis. She broke the case."

Well, Mama got distracted. She forgot to be mad at us any more. "What's going on with you two?" she wanted to know. Well, I guess she could see that the stuffing was out of both of us.

(N.B. Men are interesting. M.L.)

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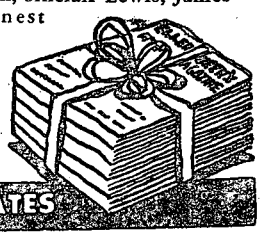

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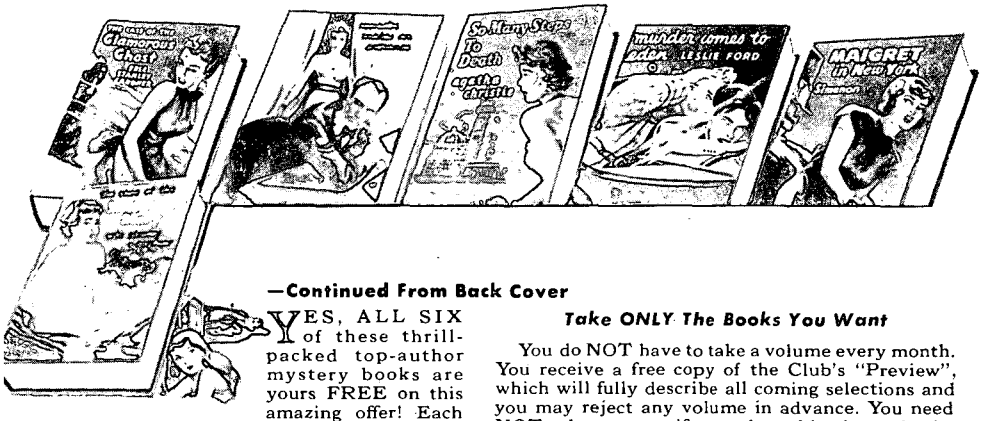

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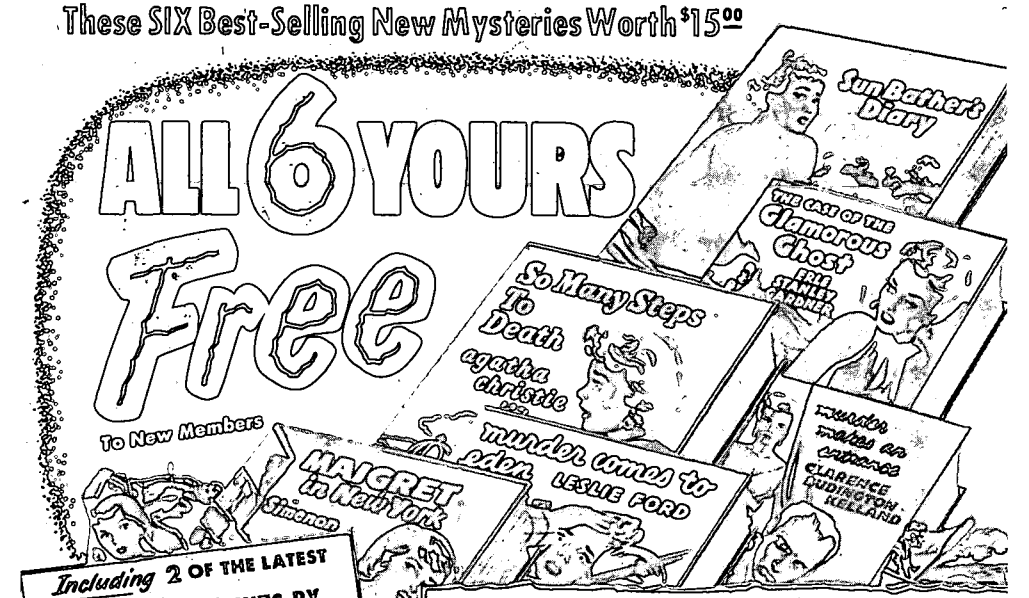

Including 2 OF THE LATEST

Perry Mason HITS BY ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Plus THRILLERS BY

- ☆ AGATHA CHRISTIE
- ☆ CLARENCE B. KELLAND
- ☆ LESLIE FORD
- ☆ SIMENON

① The Case of the Sunbather's Diary
By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

A gorgeous blonde offers Perry Mason $1500 to get back her clothes and car, stolen while she was sunbathing. Then she's arrested for murder. The only *other* suspect is Perry himself!

② The Case of the Glamorous Ghost
By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Perry's client can't remember a thing that happened to her on the night her husband was murdered. She can't even recognize *her own* .38 — THE MURDER WEAPON.

③ So Many Steps to Death
By AGATHA CHRISTIE

Hilary Craven agreed to help find missing atomic scientist, Tom Betterton. A dangerous job —because Betterton was the prisoner of a mad scientist who collected—HUMAN BRAINS!

④ Murder Makes An Entrance
By CLARENCE B. KELLAND

First a man is shot on the way to keeping a date with Miss Piper. Her next "date" has a bomb explode in his apartment. And now she has a date with *the killer!*

⑤ Murder Comes to Eden
By LESLIE FORD

Spig O'Leary ignored the talk about a "curse" on his new home. Then he quarreled with Ashton. "I'll kill you," Spig shouted in anger. Ashton pitched forward—DEAD!

⑥ Maigret in New York
By SIMENON

A young Frenchman *disappears* mysteriously. The trail leads Inspector Maigret to *an old murder*, then to a *new* MURDER. Only *one* man can help him solve the case. Maigret finds *him*—DEAD!

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